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Tuesday, 13 February 2007, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Burian	(Slovakia)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Congo	Mr. Biabaroh-Iboro
	France	Mr. De La Sablière
	Ghana	Mr. Christian
	Indonesia	Mr. Jenie
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	Peru	Mr. Voto-Bernales
	Qatar	Mr. Al-Nasser
	Russian Federation	Mr. Churkin
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Mr. Wolff

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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07-23690 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: I should like to inform the Council that I have received letters from the representatives of Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Cuba, Egypt, Germany, Israel, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Norway, Pakistan, Senegal, the Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey and Venezuela in which they request to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite those representatives to participate in the consideration of the item, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Gillerman (Israel) took a seat at the Council table; the representatives of the other aforementioned countries took the seats reserved for them at the side of the Council Chamber.

The President: I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter dated 12 February 2007 from the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, which will be issued as document S/2007/83, and which reads as follows.

> "I have the honour to request that, in accordance with its previous practice, the Security Council invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations to participate in the meeting of the Security Council which will be held Tuesday, 13 February 2007, regarding the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question."

I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to participate in the meeting in accordance with the rules of procedure and the previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

I invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to take a seat at the Council table.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. De Soto to take a seat at the Council table.

I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter dated 12 February 2007 from His Excellency Mr. Paul Badji, representative of Senegal, in which he requests to be invited, in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda.

If I hear no objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to His Excellency Mr. Paul Badji.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

I invite Mr. Badji to take the seat reserved for him at the side of the Council Chamber.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General. I now give him the floor.

Mr. De Soto: When the Quartet met recently in Washington, it underscored the critical need to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Last week, a very important step forward was taken in the cause of stability and unity among Palestinians with the agreement to form a national unity Government, reached in Mecca. Next week, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert are scheduled to hold a trilateral meeting with United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for the first

Israeli-Palestinian discussions on the political horizon of the peace process in six years. The Quartet will meet again on 21 February in Berlin.

A newly active Quartet, a more closely involved Arab world, a Palestinian national unity Government and the beginning of political dialogue between the parties have, when taken together, the potential to help restore calm and re-energize efforts to achieve a two-State solution. However, as violence and tension during the past few weeks attest, many immediate and longer-term dangers and challenges to stability and peace will have to be overcome.

I turn first to the agreement to form a Palestinian national unity Government reached under the auspices of His Majesty King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, whose efforts, along with those of several other Arab leaders, to support Palestinian unity have been widely recognized, including by the Secretary-General.

The process of forming a new Palestinian Government as such has yet to begin. Some names of ministers were agreed upon in Mecca, including the important ministries of foreign affairs and finance, which will be occupied by independents well known to the international community, but other posts, including the key position of interior minister, are still to be finalized. The agreement incorporates the text of the commissioning letter that President Abbas would send to Ismail Haniya, which would initiate the process of Government formation. The letter calls upon him "to respect the agreements signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization".

As the Council will be aware, on 9 September 1993, in a letter to the Israeli Prime Minister as part of an agreed exchange of letters, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman stated that "the PLO recognizes the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security. The PLO accepts United Nations Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973). The PLO renounces the use of terrorism and other acts of violence".

The commissioning letter also calls upon the new Prime Minister "to respect international legitimacy resolutions". Such resolutions include not only Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), but also resolution 1515 (2003), in which the Council endorsed the road map. The commissioning letter also includes a Government commitment to work to achieve Palestinian national goals "as ratified by the resolutions of the Palestine National Council and the basic law articles and the national conciliation document and the Arab summit's resolutions". As the Council will be aware, a Palestine National Council resolution of November 1988 accepted Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) and rejected terrorism in all its forms. The Council would also be aware that among the Arab summit resolutions is the 2002 Arab peace initiative.

I cite those references because they show the potential of the agreement reached in Mecca. I use the word "potential" advisedly because the agreement has other aspects that also need to be examined, has yet to be implemented and has not been the subject of full discussion among Quartet partners. As they indicated in a statement on 9 February, Quartet principals hope that the desired calm would prevail as a result of the agreement. They are awaiting the formation of the new Palestinian Government and have reaffirmed their support for a Government committed to non-violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the road map.

The Quartet will meet in Berlin on 21 February to give full consideration to developments. The Berlin meeting will come just two days after the trilateral meeting convened by United States Secretary of State Rice on 19 February in Jerusalem, which initiative the Quartet discussed and welcomed when it met in Washington, D.C., on 2 February. Intensive consultations are continuing between senior United States, Israeli, Palestinian and regional officials in advance of that meeting, and Quartet envoys are meeting in Jerusalem this coming Friday. The goal of the trilateral meeting, as stated by Secretary Rice at Luxor, is "to have discussions about the broad issues on the horizon so that we can work on the road map and try to accelerate the road map and move forward towards the establishment of a Palestinian State". That would help to define more clearly the road map's destination — a permanent status agreement that resolves all outstanding issues, including, of course, borders, refugees, Jerusalem, settlements and security.

Quartet partners are determined to give active follow-up to that and any subsequent trilateral meetings, as well as to the continued efforts being pursued bilaterally between Israel and the Palestinians. They intend to remain closely engaged with each other and regional partners in an effort to move the parties towards meaningful negotiations.

While we have reason to sound more hopeful today than we have been in previous briefings, no one should underestimate the enormousness of the tasks that would face any new Palestinian Government or the many difficulties in the way of fruitful discussions between Israel and the Palestinians.

The first challenge is to curb violence of several kinds. This year alone, 137 Palestinians, including 13 children, have been killed by fellow Palestinians in internal clashes, while 445 have been injured. That compares with 146 killed in 2006 and 11 in 2005. Before Egypt brokered a ceasefire prior to the Mecca meetings, factional violence in Gaza crossed previous red lines with assaults on a presidential compound and convoy, on the Islamic University, and on training camps of rival forces. Rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine guns and other heavy weapons were used by both sides. Schools, shops and businesses had to close, and United Nations humanitarian operations were interrupted. The violence has taken a terrible toll in civilian lives, living standards, social fabric and psychological well-being.

It is equally important to calm Israeli-Palestinian violence, which has been deeply concerning in the past few weeks. In Eilat, a Palestinian suicide bomber killed three Israelis in an atrocity condemned around the world. At least 36 rockets have been fired from Gaza since 25 January. Israel has shown commendable restraint in the face of those unjustified attacks from Gaza. However, the number of Israel Defence Force (IDF) search-and-detention campaigns in the West Bank has jumped by 58 per cent since the start of 2007, while armed and unarmed clashes between Palestinians and the IDF in the West Bank have risen by 88 per cent. The IDF must, when carrying out operations involving searches and detentions, adhere strictly to all international legal obligations, including human rights obligations. This year 19 Palestinians, including 5 children, have been killed by the IDF, and 72 have been injured.

We are also deeply concerned about continuing tensions over Israel's construction work on a new walkway to restore a broken bridge leading to the Mughrabi Gate of the Haram al-Sharif — or Temple Mount — compound in the Old City of Jerusalem, and accompanying archeological digging. Israel says its work is purely for safety and access reasons, but there has been a strong reaction in many quarters of the Arab and Muslim worlds. The Israeli Defence Minister has also indicated that proceeding with the work posed a security risk. That prediction seems to have been borne out late last week, when clashes broke out between Palestinians and Israeli security forces at the site and in other places in Jerusalem. While the Cabinet approved continuation of the work on Sunday, the Mayor of Jerusalem has suspended construction, but not excavation, pending a new zoning plan that would involve public consultation.

A second set of challenges, also noted by the Quartet on 2 February, relates to preserving and building the capacity of institutions of Palestinian governance, as well as developing the Palestinian economy. The economy cannot be developed without major steps from both parties to implement all aspects of the Agreement on Movement and Access. Although there have been some improvements this year, the implementation of the Agreement remains very patchy. Between 1 January and 10 February 2007, exports through the Karni crossing, which is the primary transit point for goods into and out of Gaza, reached approximately 46 trucks per day, a four-fold increase in the number of truckloads exported in November 2006 but still only 11 per cent of the target set by the Agreement.

Other aspects of the Agreement remain completely stalled. The effects of falling so far short of the Agreement's targets are being seen: factories are closing, farmers are not investing in export crops and labour markets have contracted. Today, 80 per cent of Gaza residents rely, at least to some extent, on food aid. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, closures now stand at 529, an increase of 25 per cent over last year, despite commitments made at the meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas in December. Without greater movement and access, trade will continue to drop, and reliance on aid will continue to increase.

Palestinian institutions — including schools, hospitals and ministries — have been badly harmed over the past 12 months. The extended strike over the non-payment of salaries has also taken its toll. The financial management system of the Palestinian Authority has been degraded, with consequent weakening of transparent reporting on fiscal operations. The security sector remains oversized, factionalized, unevenly trained and under split command. The fiscal crisis of the Palestinian Authority is severe. Any new Government will face a budget

deficit of about 30 per cent of gross domestic product, unless the currently unsustainable fiscal position is addressed — which would require reducing the wage bill, improving the collection of taxes and utility bills and streamlining social transfer. Israel must also consistently hand over the clearance revenue that it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. At present, Palestinian Authority public expenditures are supported mainly by external funding, and total revenues amount to less than two thirds of recurring costs.

During the past year the programme of the current Palestinian Authority Government hampered the ability of donors to help to address those issues. Interventions have largely been through parallel mechanisms, which have gradually undermined the very institutions intended to serve as the foundation of a future Palestinian State. To facilitate the recovery of those institutions, resumption of direct support and more holistic approaches to both development and institutional reform are needed. We hope that the new Palestinian Authority Government's programme will facilitate a return to that approach.

A third set of challenges relates to the continued lack of any positive Israeli action to remove settlement outposts and the continued settlement activity and barrier construction on occupied Palestinian territory in the West Bank despite the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention and the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. It is vital that action is taken to ensure that final status issues are not prejudiced by the creation of facts on the ground.

In Lebanon today at least three people were killed, and many others wounded, in a double bus bombing that took place near the mainly Christian town of Bikfaya, north-east of Beirut. Those bombings have occurred at a time of acute political tension in Lebanon. The domestic political impasse continues, with no change in the positions of the parties. The League of Arab States has continued its efforts at mediation. The United Nations representative, Geir Pedersen, who was recently appointed as Special Coordinator for Lebanon, has continued to work closely with all the parties to advocate dialogue and consensus on the various issues in contention.

The general calm that has been prevailing in southern Lebanon since the cessation of hostilities last August was disrupted temporarily on 7 February. Mr. Guéhenno briefed the Council on that day regarding an incident that the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) subsequently had the opportunity to investigate more thoroughly. The IDF had signalled to UNIFIL that it intended to cross the Israeli technical fence to clear a number of mines that it claimed to have identified north of the fence but on Israeli territory. While acknowledging Israel's security concerns, UNIFIL urged the IDF to suspend its action and to resolve the matter by relaying its concerns through UNIFIL's liaison channels and through an urgent tripartite meeting, so as to avoid an increase in tension along the Blue Line. The UNIFIL Force Commander, Mr. Pedersen and I remained in close touch with the parties to urge restraint and the resolution of this issue through peaceful means.

Despite UNIFIL appeals, the IDF proceeded with the operation later that night. The Lebanese army opened small arms fire after the IDF made an opening in the technical fence but while they were still on the Israeli side of the Blue Line. The Lebanese armed forces intensified fire, using both rifles and machineguns aimed at the IDF bulldozer, which by that time had crossed the fence. The IDF responded with at least one missile. No casualties were reported. Subsequently, the IDF bulldozer and excavator worked in the earth to clear the area of mines and violated the Blue Line in the process. The incident took place at the same location where the IDF had shot at and destroyed four improvised explosive devices on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line two days before.

The firing by the Lebanese armed forces constitutes a violation of resolution 1701 (2006) and a breach of the cessation of hostilities agreement. As I mentioned a moment ago, the Israel Defense Force also violated the resolution by crossing the Blue Line. The exchange of fire posed a threat to the lives of UNIFIL troops patrolling in the area.

These incidents illustrate the continued volatility of the situation in southern Lebanon and the concomitant need for all sides to respect fully resolution 1701 (2006) and to continue to act with restraint at all times. In this regard, it is of paramount importance that concerns are addressed through the tripartite mechanism chaired by UNIFIL, which has proved effective in finding solutions when the parties have chosen to engage in it.

On 6 February, the United Nations signed the agreement between the United Nations and the Lebanese Republic on the establishment of a special tribunal for Lebanon. The accord was earlier signed in Beirut. The signing was carried out in line with the mandate given by the Security Council to the Secretary-General to proceed, together with the Government of Lebanon and in conformity with the Constitution of Lebanon, with the final steps for the conclusion of the agreement. The United Nations remains hopeful that the Lebanese institutions will be able to perform their tasks and fulfil their responsibility on the way toward the establishment of the tribunal.

With the initiatives now under way on the Israeli-Palestinian track, we have the opportunity to foster a dynamic in which positive developments are mutually reinforcing. That must now be the goal.

The Mecca agreement signals a rejection by Palestinians of internal violence to resolve their differences. It marks a renewed commitment by the Arab world to supporting Palestinian unity and moderation. We hope that it will lead to a Government that donors can support for three reasons: first, because only if the security forces work cohesively, rather than facing off in the streets, can the terrible violence in the occupied Palestinian territory be seriously tackled and security sector reform be durable. That is as vital for Israel as it is for Palestinians. Secondly, further delay in supporting Palestinian institutions and reviving economic life could have devastating and long-term consequences. Thirdly, while negotiations with Israel remain the province of the Palestine Liberation Organization and in the hands of President Abbas, the institutions of the Palestinian Authority also have responsibilities to ensure that Palestinian obligations are met under existing agreements.

We are therefore watching developments carefully to see how the Mecca agreement is implemented in the coming period and what actions are taken by the parties to sustain the new dynamic. Action by Israel to address the longstanding issue of prisoners and by the Palestinian side to secure release of the Israeli soldier held hostage in Gaza will be crucial to achieving lasting progress.

We also look forward to next week's trilateral meeting. Excessive expectations should not be placed on one such meeting, but we hope that it will be the beginning of a genuine dialogue leading to negotiations that can define the end-goal for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, and clarify the path to achieving it. Certainly, all Quartet partners are determined to work together in supporting such an effort.

Our goal is clear: an end to the occupation that began in 1967 and the achievement of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace with Israel. The overall goal of a comprehensive peace between Israel and all its Arab neighbours must not be neglected. We must act with the right mixture of firmness and flexibility with all parties to ensure that they move decisively down this path.

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached among Council members, I wish to remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than five minutes in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously. Delegations with lengthy statements are kindly requested to circulate their texts in writing and to deliver a condensed version when speaking in the Chamber.

Mr. Al-Nasser (Qatar) (*spoke in Arabic*): Mr. President, allow me to begin by thanking you for convening this important and well-timed meeting to discuss the situation in the Middle East which continues to be a priority for the Security Council. I would like to thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and the Secretary-General's Personal Representative, for his presence and for his briefing to the Council on behalf of the Secretary-General. I would also like to associate myself with the statement that will be delivered later on behalf of the Arab Group.

The Palestinian territories have recently seen a seriously different kind of escalation brought about by the Israeli authorities. The events have taken a more serious turn endangering peace and security in the region. The Israeli authorities violated the sanctity of the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound in East Jerusalem to permit for demolition and excavations on the historic road leading to the Mughrabi gate of the Haram al-Sharif compound in the Old City of Jerusalem, which is one of the main gates adjacent to the Western Wall of the holy sanctuary. These excavations, irrespective of the flimsy pretext promoted by the Israeli Government, are an example of

the same pattern of actions perpetrated by Israel, the occupying Power, to change the legal status of occupied Jerusalem, its demographic composition and its historic and religious landmarks.

These actions and measures are illegal and unjustified, a fact previously and frequently stressed by the Security Council, for example, in resolution 465 (1980), and by the General Assembly. Furthermore, compromising the Islamic holy sites constitutes a grave escalation that brings about inauspicious repercussions in the region and the Islamic world at large.

Let me ask here whether these provocative policies are compatible with the pursuit of peace. Would unilateral attempts to impose a fait accompli be considered a positive contribution to negotiations, if we assume that there is a sincere desire for peace?

We have previously stressed the importance of establishing a government of national unity in Palestine and of ending the current crisis. It is encouraging to see that the dialogue between Hamas and Fatah in Mecca has borne positive fruits as a result of the auspicious efforts of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The result of the dialogue was that Ismail Haniyeh, the current Palestinian Prime Minister, was entrusted with presiding over a government of national unity. That step not only will avert the Palestinian bloodshed, but is considered essential for a resumption of the peace process.

We should like to take this opportunity to express our hope that the establishment of a government of national unity in Palestine will bring together our Palestinian brethren and align their positions in a way that fulfils the hopes of the Palestinian people and preserves their national unity. We hope that the sincere efforts to establish the government will continue. Such a step, which would mark the beginning of a new chapter, would benefit both the Palestinians and the Israeli Government.

A situation in which the Palestinian Authority was able to perform the vital administrative tasks of a government, including ensuring security and providing basic services for its citizens, would be in the interests of all stakeholders. We therefore urge all the parties concerned to support the Palestinian Authority, and we call once again on the Israeli Government to lift the siege it has imposed on the Palestinian people, who are suffering a grave humanitarian situation unlike any other in the world.

Ever since the adoption of resolution 1701 (2006), the situation along the Lebanese-Israeli border has been calm, with the exception of airspace incursions by Israeli jets and the recent event in which fire was exchanged when an Israeli bulldozer violated the border, allegedly in order to clear a number of explosive devices along the barbed-wire line between the two countries. In such a volatile situation as that along the Israeli-Lebanese border, both parties must abide strictly by the provisions of the cessation of hostilities, which is still in effect, because a simple violation could constitute a major setback and endanger stability. We therefore call on the Security Council to seriously address Israel's violations of the Lebanese border and its airspace. The Security Council failed to condemn these acts, a matter that is truly regrettable.

The Quartet will meet in a few days' time in Berlin. Once again, we wish to express our hope that the Quartet will provide an incentive for breaking the stalemate in the Middle East. We support the significant role of the Quartet, which we believe is unique.

The Security Council should focus more intensely on the situation in the Middle East, with a view to reviving the peace process. We expect the Council to play an active and robust role in reaching a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian question and the Arab-Israeli conflict. That is precisely what the Council does when conflicts rage in other parts of the world. The comprehensive and lasting solution should be in accordance with international legality and based on previous agreements, the relevant Security Council resolutions, the terms of reference of the peace process and the Road Map.

Mr. Kumalo (South Africa): My delegation wishes to associate itself with the statement to be delivered by the representative of Cuba on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

We, too, welcome the decision by Fatah and Hamas to form a government of national unity in Palestine. The significance of the Mecca accord lies in the fact that it provides clear evidence that Palestinians are both able and willing to settle their internal differences. The Palestinian leaders have also demonstrated their aim of forging a united and peaceful front to address the urgent task of ending the illegal

occupation of their country, which remains the key to peace and development throughout the Middle East region.

Furthermore, both Fatah and Hamas have made significant concessions, which we hope are sufficient to break the international siege imposed on the Palestinian people. Therefore, the opportunity presented by the Mecca accord should not be squandered, and direct negotiations on final-status issues should commence without delay. We hope that a new dialogue will be followed by the establishment of confidence-building measures such as the extension of the ceasefire to the West Bank and the release of prisoners on both sides.

We urge the international community to ease its financial blockade against the Palestinian Authority. In particular, we urge Israel to release all Palestinian tax revenues. The taxes withheld by Israel belong to the Palestinian people and are neither development assistance nor generosity of any kind. These funds are urgently required to alleviate socio-economic hardship, including the deteriorating Palestinian institutions.

The vision of a two-State solution, as enshrined in Security Council resolution 1397 (2002), and the principle of land for peace must underpin any permanent settlement of the Middle East conflict. It is our hope that the upcoming trilateral meeting that will take place among Israel, Palestine and the United States, followed by a meeting of the Quartet, will help reinvigorate the peace process and ultimately lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital, existing side by side with Israel, with both States enjoying secure and internationally recognized borders.

Regarding the situation on the ground, South Africa reiterates that Israel should refrain from taking any unilateral action — such as the building of settlements and the separation wall — that would predetermine final-status negotiations. The building of new settlements in the West Bank is contrary to international law.

My delegation is particularly concerned about the excavation work being carried out by Israel beneath the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound and the demolition of the historic road connecting Bab al-Maghariba with the compound. The excavation work is undermining the foundations and threatening a collapse of the mosque, which is located in an area declared by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

The Mission of Palestine brought this matter to the attention of the Council in a letter dated 6 February 2007 (S/2007/58). Among other things, the letter stated:

> "Additionally, Israeli occupying authorities continue to carry out excavation works below the Holy Al-Aqsa Compound, undermining its foundations and threatening it with collapse.
>
> "There are also concerning reports that Israel, the occupying Power, plans to construct a tourist site below the Holy Al-Aqsa Compound, further raising fears about serious threats facing the Holy Compound. Additionally, Israeli occupying authorities have banned Palestinians below the age of 45 from entering the Holy Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound in grave contravention of their basic right to access their holy sites and clear violation of Israel's obligations, as an occupying Power, to ensure and protect that right."

On 7 February 2007, the Israeli Mission responded as follows.

> "The Israel Antiquities Authority has begun salvage excavations in the Jerusalem Archaeological Park for the sole purpose of erecting support pillars for a permanent access ramp. This is for the benefit and safety of visitors to the area. The new ramp will replace a temporary wooden bridge built following the collapse of the old ramp. The former Mugrabim was declared a 'hazardous structure' on account of erosion and decay caused by natural disasters over time. Salvage excavations are standard archaeological excavations conducted in declared archaeological sites slated for construction and development. Salvage excavations prevent and minimize damage which could be caused to ancient remains as a result of construction. Similar excavations have been conducted in the past, and are indeed common in cities with such rich in archaeology and history, like Jerusalem."

On 9 February 2007, the Palestinian Mission reminded the Council in a letter circulated to members that

> "The Security Council has repeatedly affirmed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 to all the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, including East Jerusalem, and has called upon Israel to abide by the provisions of the Convention. In several of its resolutions, the Council declared all Israeli measures and actions which aim at changing the status of Jerusalem as invalid, and it called upon Israel to rescind all such measures and to desist from further action changing the status of Jerusalem. The above-mentioned Israeli action is obviously another measure aimed at the judaization of the city, creating yet additional facts with regard to the Holy City's status, thus adversely affecting the outcome of the final status negotiations". (*S/2007/75, p. 1*)

The concern of my delegation, confirmed by many other letters the Council has received in the past few days from other United Nations delegations, is that the Al-Aqsa mosque compound is one of Jerusalem's sites revered by millions of Muslims throughout the world and that therefore any damage to it is likely to have serious repercussions. We urge the Israeli Government to avoid the destruction of this vital infrastructure.

The situation in the Middle East, and in particular the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has been on the agenda of the Security Council since the creation of the United Nations. However, there has been a consistent failure by the parties themselves and by the international community to address seriously the challenges facing that region. A regional solution must address the plight of the millions of Palestinians who live as refugees outside Israel. The international community, particularly Israel, can no longer pretend that those living in appalling conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon and elsewhere do not exist. Furthermore, peace in the region also hinges on ending the occupation of the Lebanese Sheba'a farms and the Syrian Golan Heights. The grave situation in the Middle East demands the concerted attention and action of the countries in the region as well as the rest of the world.

As South African President Thabo Mbeki wrote recently,

> "the question can no longer be avoided — is it not time that the United Nations, genuinely representing all nations, assumes its rightful position and leads a global process to address all the interconnected challenges facing the peoples of the Middle East and West Asia? None of us is entitled to succumb to a destructive paralysis by resigning ourselves to the expectation that the sister peoples of the Middle East are ineluctably condemned to be consumed by an unstoppable conflagration, foretold by current events as an impending and modern frightening apocalypse, as a result of which outright anarchy would be loosed upon the world".

Finally, let me remind the Council that the United Nations Charter entrusts the Security Council with the mandate to maintain international peace and security. Global challenges such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict threaten the whole world and demand multilateral solutions that the United Nations, in particular the Security Council, is qualified to lead and address.

Mr. Christian (Ghana): Let me begin, Mr. President, by expressing my delegation's appreciation to you for convening this meeting, which should enable us, once again, to deliberate on ways of advancing peace in the Middle East. We also wish to thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, for his comprehensive briefing.

Progress had been made in the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) without serious incidents until the confrontation between the Israel Defense Forces and the Lebanese Armed Forces on 7 February 2007. Before that unfortunate occurrence, we had expected that the cessation of hostilities would hold and would ensure the stabilization of the security and military situation along the Blue Line. We commend the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for its quick response to the crisis and for establishing a buffer zone between the two armies, which we hope will continue to exercise maximum restraint. We need not remind Israel and Lebanon of the long and arduous road to peace and of the need to deepen their commitment to the implementation of a permanent ceasefire based on the full acceptance of the relevant provisions of the Taif Accords and of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006).

Given the period of relative calm created by the mutual ceasefire agreed on between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas, we can expect nothing other than the intensification of efforts towards reviving the stalled Middle East peace process. In this regard, we have noted the efforts being made by the Quartet to launch meaningful negotiations to solve the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine. We hope that the Quartet's efforts will lead, initially, to the consolidation of the ceasefire within an international framework with a definition of its parameters and rules and its extension to the West Bank. We are indeed hopeful that the trilateral meeting between Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas and United States Secretary of State Ms. Condoleezza Rice will chart the way forward and re-energize the peace process. It should then be possible for the Quartet to look again at the Road Map with a view to restating its goals, principles and final destination, with the aim of securing a two-State solution to the Middle East conflict within an acceptable framework.

We welcome with cautious optimism the Mecca accord reached between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Khaled Meshal. We have been very concerned about the fighting between Fatah and Hamas loyalists that has claimed several lives. We hope that the agreement to form a government of national unity will lead to an immediate end to factional violence between the two parties and the stabilization of the political and security situation in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Given the current efforts towards peace in the Middle East, it would be expedient for the Palestinian government of national unity to commit itself to the Quartet principles of non-violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Road Map.

The stifling of international aid and the financial boycott imposed by Israel on Palestine have led to severe disruptions to Palestinian basic services and have impacted negatively on an already fragile economy. We therefore appeal once again to all concerned to release such withheld funds and thereby bring succour to the Palestinian people. We join other like-minded countries in expressing our displeasure at the demolition of the historic road connecting Bab-Al-Maghariba with the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound in addition to two rooms adjacent to the Al-Buraq wall. We also express concern over construction work initiated by Israel in the Old City of Jerusalem. Such provocative actions have in the past led to unnecessary tension and recrimination between Israel and those opposed to its actions in this regard. The suspension of construction work by the Israeli authorities should enable them to take stock of the negative consequences of their actions and decide firmly to cease all activities on the mosque compound.

There can be no military solution to the Palestinian question; the vision of an independent, viable and sovereign State living side by side with Israel in peace and security will be achieved only through compromises and negotiations in good faith. The Security Council's task of being actively engaged in the resolution of this problem, on the basis of its resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and a revitalized Road Map, cannot be overemphasized.

Mr. Churkin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We are grateful to Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, for his briefing on the situation with regard to the Middle East settlement process. Russia has been working consistently to bring about stability and lasting peace in the region, and that is a focus of the current visit by Mr. Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, to several States in the Middle East.

In recent weeks a number of significant events have occurred in the Middle East; these merit careful analysis and assessment. The most important of these were the talks held in Saudi Arabia between leaders of the main Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas. These led to agreement on the formation over the course of the coming weeks of a Palestinian government of national unity. We welcome this as an important, indeed fundamental, step towards uniting Palestinian groups and overcoming the prolonged crisis of power in Palestine. We hope that a future Palestinian National Authority government, established in line with the well known demands of the Quartet of international mediators, the norms of international law and the provisions of the Arab Peace Initiative, will be an important factor in relaunching Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.

We believe also that implementation of the agreements reached at Mecca with the help and support of the leadership of Saudi Arabia should be accompanied by the removal of roadblocks in the

Palestinian territories; these are a cause of suffering and other harm to civilians.

Across the Muslim world, there was a pained response to the Israeli archaeological dig and construction work in the historic area of Jerusalem. We need to be aware that any insensitive activity in Jerusalem risks sparking tension in the region. We believe that determining the status of Jerusalem is among the issues that must be resolved through direct Israeli-Palestinian final-status negotiations. In that context, we consider that the parties to the conflict must refrain from taking unilateral measures that could exacerbate the situation with regard to this very delicate element of the Palestinian-Israeli settlement process. In our view, the order by the Mayor of Jerusalem to suspend work on the Temple Mount is a step in the right direction.

The Quartet of international mediators continues to work actively. It recently held a ministerial meeting in Washington, D.C., and another meeting, in Berlin, is on the agenda. We believe that at the latter important gathering there will be discussion of the need to define a comprehensive framework for a Middle East settlement, first and foremost with respect to the Palestinian-Israeli dimension but without losing sight of the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. In our view, such a comprehensive approach could come about through a carefully prepared international conference. It is important that the work of the Quartet include active and regular participation by leading regional actors and the League of Arab States, as well as by the parties to the conflict.

Unrest continues in Lebanon. We call again on Lebanese political groups to seek compromise. There is still no alternative to achieving a common Lebanese agreement. All Lebanese forces must refrain from violence. We are gravely concerned at today's explosions in Lebanon, and we hope that the Lebanese will display sufficient restraint and political will not to permit the situation to escalate into armed conflict.

Mr. Jenie (Indonesia): I thank you, Mr. President, for convening this open debate on the situation in the Middle East, an issue of paramount importance to the international community. Let me also thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his briefing on recent developments in the Middle East.

Before I proceed further, let me associate my delegation with the statements to be made by the representative of Cuba on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and by the representative of Azerbaijan on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Conference.

The Middle East conflict remains the most volatile conflict on the globe today and continues to pose a clear and present danger to international peace and security. The intractability of the conflict in the Middle East is a matter of deep concern to my delegation. We believe that an unprecedented step should be taken by all parties concerned to put an end to the conflict. Hopefully sooner, not later, there will come a moment when a once-and-for-all solution to the conflict is agreed upon and is acceptable to all parties. In that context, we reaffirm Indonesia's long-standing and tireless commitment to support and contribute to the process towards finding a peaceful solution that would fulfil the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and statehood. At this stage, however, it is hard to think of the victory of peace through a lofty one-time solution.

At this moment, we have to appreciate positive developments of any scale that keep the peace process in motion. Among such positive developments was the signing of the Mecca declaration by President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Khaled Meshal on 8 February 2007. This lays the foundation for the formation of a government of national unity in Palestine. It is our fervent hope that the agreement will immediately be implemented and that it will be supported by the international community. We believe that the international community should respond to this encouraging development in a positive manner.

My delegation believes that peace cannot be fully obtained by diplomacy alone; it also requires the commitment of the parties to the conflict to cease the use of force. Thus, my delegation encourages the Israelis and the Palestinians to exercise restraint. Our call for the exercise of restraint from all extrajudicial or provocative actions would also include firm assurances by the Israelis, as the occupying Power, that they will maintain the nature of the holy sites in East Jerusalem, and the Muslim character of those sites, including the holy Al-Aqsa mosque.

Indonesia deeply deplores the excavation in the holy Al-Aqsa mosque. We urge Israel to immediately stop the excavation, because not only does the work

have the potential to damage the mosque, which is highly revered by Muslims, but it will also increase tension and complicate efforts to revive the peace process in the region.

With reference to the situation in Lebanon, my delegation has mixed feelings about recent developments in that country. We are pleased with the steady implementation of resolution 1701 (2006). The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which is now standing at approximately 12,000 personnel, has steadily been carrying out its mandate. However, tensions remain in that country.

My delegation stresses the need for respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon. In this regard, we note with great concern the continuing Israeli air violations and the recent crossing by the Israeli military of the Blue Line, which led to a series of exchanges of fire, causing injuries to Lebanese security personnel. These actions are also a violation of resolution 1701 (2006).

My delegation is also concerned about the security situation in Lebanon. The very recent bomb blasts tearing through two buses, which caused at least a dozen casualties and deaths near the town of Bikfaya, are deplorable. Previously, violent clashes between students in Beirut University had reinforced concerns in Beirut.

We believe that the achievement of sustainable peace in Lebanon depends not only on the deployment of an international peace mission such as UNIFIL, but also on the existence of political unity and national cohesion. Threats from within are no less perilous than those from outside. This will require that all parties in Lebanon have a strong commitment to national reconciliation and consensus and to the creation of a united and stable Lebanon.

We strongly encourage countries in the region to help to mitigate the consequences of the ongoing political turbulence in Lebanon and to prevent its spread.

As a final point, let me say that, in the view of my delegation, peace will come to the region only when the Israeli Government is willing fully to comply with the relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 1515 (2003), which envisage the establishment of a independent, viable and sovereign Palestinian State, living in peace and security alongside Israel.

It would be a tragedy — for the Israelis, the Palestinians and the rest of the world — if peace is rejected and sustained violence is permitted to continue to prevail in the region.

Mr. Spatafora (Italy): I would like first of all to thank the Special Coordinator and Personal Representative, Alvaro De Soto, for his very interesting and informative briefing. I would like to recall that he said in his message that "reasons to sound more hopeful" are stronger today that they were in the past. This means that today there is a window of opportunity that is more promising than ever before. We must therefore make a concerted effort to prevent that window of opportunity from closing, either partially or entirely.

Italy fully associates itself with the statement to be delivered later by Germany, which holds the presidency of the European Union.

Italy welcomes the agreement reached by the Palestinians to form a Government of national unity as an important step forward in the start of a reconciliation process between the various Palestinian political forces. In that regard, we particularly appreciated the role played by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. He worked with patience and skill, alongside other Arab leaders and the Arab League, and he succeeded in creating conditions that pave the way for the Palestinian parties to go back to the negotiating table, thus facilitating the reaching of an agreement. That confirms the important role that all the countries in the region can and should play to restore peace and stability in the Middle East.

While sharing the hopes expressed by the Quartet in its statements of 2 and 9 February, Italy believes that it is necessary carefully to assess the new Government's programme. We hope that it will reflect accurately the principles expressed by the Quartet — an essential condition for the normalization of its relations with the international community. We now await the terms of the agreement to set up a Palestinian Government of national unity, and we stand ready, together with the other member States of the European Union, to work with a legitimate Palestinian Government that has adopted a platform reflecting the Quartet principles.

While keeping to the results-based sequential approach of the Road Map, Italy has consistently underlined the urgent need to elaborate new strategies that offer the parties clear negotiating prospects for reaching a definitive solution to the crisis, as we believe that the process has to be accelerated. In our view, the parties must be offered a clear sense of the endgame: a two-State solution leading to the creation of a democratic, independent and viable Palestinian State and providing precise guarantees of peace and security to Israel and to the neighbouring countries.

We believe it crucial that Israel, at this sensitive time, refrain from any action that could be misunderstood by the Palestinians, particularly regarding the status of Jerusalem, and which could jeopardize the results achieved so far as a result of the most strenuous efforts.

It is equally important that all forms of provocation by the Palestinians towards Israel cease, particularly the launching of Qassam rockets, and that the Palestinian authorities do their utmost to prevent any recurrence of terrorist acts such as the recent tragic attack in Eilat — which we condemn once again in the strongest possible terms.

Italy believes that it is time for negotiations to start on the basis of effective mutual confidence-building measures, including the full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access, particularly at Rafah, whose opening should be routine rather than exceptional, as well as the implementation of the Sharm el-Sheik Agreements, the release of prisoners and the complete transfer of customs revenues to the Palestinian Authority.

Above all, we believe that, in the long-awaited new climate of dialogue that will emerge with the formation of the new Government, the truce currently in force in Gaza might be extended rapidly to the West Bank as well.

Finally, Italy continues to believe that, once direct negotiations between the parties have begun, with clear prospects of a final result, a creative effort should be made to involve in the process all those regional actors that, as I said earlier, are able to make a constructive and responsible contribution to the dialogue.

Italy wishes to express its deep concern, as other speakers have done, at the news coming from Lebanon. We condemn today's attack in Bikfaya, as well as all resort to violence, in the strongest possible terms and express our heartfelt condolences to the relatives of the victims.

Italy is also deeply concerned at the incident that took place recently between the Israeli and Lebanese armies. We praise UNIFIL's prompt and effective intervention, which prevented the situation from degenerating. We hope that the existing tripartite mechanism, which has been working successfully so far, will also be used to prevent similar episodes in the future.

While we are equally concerned by the discovery of a weapons lorry, which was promptly seized by the Lebanese authorities, we appreciate the effective action taken by those authorities to counter weapons smuggling, and we hope that it will continue to be strengthened, in compliance with resolution 1701 (2006). Italy considers that the full implementation of that resolution is fundamental, in particular as concerns the freeing of the two Israeli soldiers who were kidnapped on 12 July and the resolution of the Sheba'a Farms issue.

The international community has made a substantial commitment to the stabilization and reconstruction of Lebanon, both through the creation of UNIFIL plus — to which, let me recall, 17 EU countries contribute — and by making available considerable financial resources on the occasion of the Paris Conference of 25 January. In that respect, we welcome the tangible commitment to Lebanon also expressed in Paris by the Arab world.

Finally, we call on all Lebanese forces to keep in mind that violence is not an option and immediately to resume the dialogue in order to reach an agreed solution to the various aspects of the crisis: the formation of a Government of national unity; the election of a new President of the Republic; the approval of the Statute of the International Tribunal on the murder of Rafik Hariri; a new elections law; and early political elections.

Mr. Biaboroh-Iboro (Congo) (*spoke in French*): Mr. President, my delegation would like to thank you for having convened this timely open debate on the situation in the Middle East. We thank also the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. De Soto, for the information and analysis he provided to the members of the Council.

Developments in the situation in the Middle East continue to be a source of concern for my delegation. With regard to Palestine, we regret the ongoing suffering of the people of the occupied territories, who are deprived of access to basic social services.

The sanctions to which the Palestinian Authority has been subject owing to the suspension in April 2006 of direct financial assistance, as well as Israel's withholding of Palestinian tax and customs revenues, have worsened the already precarious humanitarian situation. That catastrophic humanitarian situation has no doubt contributed to a large extent to fuelling an escalation of the fratricidal war in which the Palestinians have been engaged.

Against that backdrop, my delegation has consistently appealed to the various players in the Palestinian crisis to show restraint and to refrain from taking any unilateral measure that could aggravate the situation.

We also express concern about the violence that took place following the construction work carried out by Israel — without prior consultation — around the Al-Aqsa mosque, which led to considerable tension in the Palestinian territories and in Muslim countries.

However, my delegation welcomes the current initiatives aimed at relaunching the peace process, such as the recent visit to the region by the United States Secretary of State and the Quartet's 2 February meeting on the Middle East. We are also looking forward to the tripartite meeting between Ms. Rice, Mr. Olmert and Mr. Abbas, planned for 19 February, and to the next meeting of the Quartet, on 21 February.

In this context, we also welcome the agreement reached on 8 February in Mecca between Hamas and Fatah, with the mediation of Saudi Arabia, particularly with regard to the commitment of the parties to respect international law and agreements previously entered into by the Palestine Liberation Organization, including recognition of Israel and the renunciation of violence.

That is a major achievement and a positive step forward — one which we hope will lead to the creation, as soon as possible, of a Palestinian government of national unity. We believe that that effort should be encouraged, in particular by lifting the financial blockade, which is having such a harsh effect on the Palestinian Authority.

The Quartet should take into account all of those glimmers of hope so as to make progress in the peace process within the context of the long-cherished vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security, in accordance with the Road Map, the principles of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions and agreed mechanisms.

Turning to Lebanon, my delegation is particularly concerned about the violence there, which is in danger of leading that country one again into civil war. We condemn the bomb attack that took place this morning north of Beirut.

The war in Lebanon between Israel and Hizbollah both exposed and accelerated a political, financial, economic and social crisis that has been further exacerbated by the enormous challenge of reconstructing the devastated country.

We call upon the Lebanese people to continue, in a responsible manner, the dialogue that is under way, with a view to arriving at consensus-based solutions to the various challenges confronting Lebanon and to make optimal use of the assistance of the international community, as manifested at the Paris conference, where donors pledged contributions for the economic recovery of the country through debt reduction and economic reform.

We deplore the unilateral steps that led to the serious incident that took place between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Israeli forces along the Blue Line in the area of Yaroun on 7 February. We remind all parties that they have an obligation — in conformity with resolution 1701 (2006) — to respect the Blue Line and to refrain from any act that could further escalate the situation and endanger the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, which is deployed in the south of the country.

In conclusion, my delegation believes that, if a just, comprehensive and lasting peace is to be achieved in the Middle East, all the actors concerned, including regional players, must be involved. In this context, Syria, Iran and others could help to stabilize the situation and ensure a lasting cessation of hostilities by participating in the peace effort.

Mr. Voto-Bernales (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): I should like, first of all, to thank Ambassador Alvaro de Soto, Personal Representative of the Secretary-

General, for his detailed briefing on the situation in the Middle East. The Gaza ceasefire agreed in November between the Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert, and the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, as well as the meeting on 23 December between the two leaders, gave rise to new hope that negotiation would replace violence. Despite the daily difficulties and the fragility of the situation, we trust that those initial steps will be consolidated and lead to a new phase that will encourage action and leadership by those in Israel and Palestine who advocate a negotiated solution.

As the Quartet pointed out after its meeting on 2 February, the parties must fully implement the measures to which they agreed and must avoid taking any action that could affect the various issues that are to be resolved through negotiations in the context of the Road Map and other relevant agreements.

Concerted and consistent activities on the part of international community are required in support of those efforts. That is why we welcome the Saudi Arabian initiative, which facilitated an agreement towards the formation of a government of national unity in Palestine. In this context, it should be recalled that, if it is to be an effective interlocutor, the new Palestinian government will have to act in accordance with the three basic requirements formulated by the Quartet and endorsed by the Security Council.

A comprehensive effort to resolve the various crises and conflicts in the area is necessary. It is, primarily, the parties directly involved that must take constructive steps to reduce tensions. We trust that the tripartite meeting to be held in Jerusalem on Monday, 19 February, will help to strengthen the renewed momentum for political dialogue, which we must all encourage and support.

Furthermore, it is essential to move ahead with the adoption of measures aimed at creating a favourable environment for the promotion on both sides of a genuine political mobilization to set in progress a process designed to put an end to the occupation of territory and to move towards the establishment of a Palestinian State, living side by side in peace and security with Israel.

With regard to Lebanon, resolution 1701 (2006) must remain the framework for tackling the root causes that prevent that country from achieving stability and gaining sovereign control of its territory. We support the activities of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon in maintaining peace along the Blue Line. We also support its leadership role in the tripartite meetings that are designed to prevent any single act from leading to undesirable confrontation. However, we must not lose sight of the latent factors capable of giving rise to tensions, including border violations, renewed armed clashes and other destabilizing activities.

In this context, my delegation would like to associate itself with the Secretary-General's condemnation of the terrorist attack against innocent civilians that occurred this morning in Lebanon.

The Security Council has devoted particular attention to a number of requirements for Lebanon aimed at the restoration of its sovereignty and independence. These include the inquiry into the terrorist attack that cost former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri his life and, more recently, the international tribunal that the Council authorized to try those responsible for that and other criminal attacks as part of an agreement to be ratified in accordance with Lebanon's domestic constitutional procedures.

Once again, we urge the countries in the region to adopt a prudent and constructive attitude aimed at the promotion of dialogue and stability in Lebanon, whose security situation is critical for regional stability and peace.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm our conviction that conflict in the Middle East can be resolved only through political negotiation and on the basis of agreements reached by the parties and recognized by the international community. That is why we believe that the Quartet remains the most relevant mechanism to mobilize all of the actors concerned towards dialogue and firm understandings. We reaffirm that the Road Map is the inescapable reference point on which any initiative to give momentum to the peace process between Israel and Palestine must be based.

Mr. Arias (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, Sir, allow me, like those who have spoken before me, to congratulate Mr. Alvaro de Soto on his recent appointment as Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and to thank him for the detailed briefing he has just given us.

As we consider today the situation in the Middle East, including Palestine, we feel obliged first to pay tribute to the leadership and initiatives of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and in particular His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, that led to the agreement signed in Mecca by Mahmoud Abbas and Khaled Meshaal to establish a Government of national unity in Palestine. We trust that the implementation of the agreement will reduce violence and create conditions for a better future for the Palestinian people. We also trust that the formation of the new Government will be accompanied by political decisions that will bring an end to the financial and other restrictions afflicting the Palestinian people today.

As we have said before, the establishment of a lasting peace between Palestine and Israel requires leadership and commitment within and beyond the region. In that context, we welcome the Quartet's decision to support the parties' current efforts and we await the outcome of the efforts of United States Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, who will meet with the Prime Ministers of Israel and Palestine this month.

The formation of a Government of national unity in Palestine is a significant event, but if progress of a similar magnitude is to be achieved in the peace process, all the Palestinian political forces will need to commit to dialogue, reject violence and accept earlier agreements. We are, however, concerned that, while the construction being undertaken by the Israeli Government near the Al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem may be fully within the scope of the law, that does not mean that it is wise. We feel that, regardless of the justifications adduced, the present moment should be exploited by all to promote peace. We therefore urge the Government of Israel to suspend the construction so as to promote a climate favourable to peace negotiations.

Moreover, we deplore the fact that attacks by non-State actors continue against civilian targets in Israel. The political commitment of the Palestinian Authority will not be credible until it can prevent such acts. We also regret the ongoing actions of the Israeli Government and armed forces in violation of the resolutions of the Security Council, international law, and international humanitarian law in particular. We appeal to the leaders of Israel and Palestine not to squander this opportunity to build a realistic platform on which they can move towards lasting peace.

In that context, we recall the words of Mr. Alvaro de Soto. The basic principles of a peace agreement are known to all: the existence of two democratic States living in peace and security; the creation of an economically viable Palestinian State; and respect for the 1967 borders. Panama believes that the international community must waste no opportunity to exert its influence in favour of that process.

As regards Lebanon, Panama deplores the recent incidents of violence along the border with Israel. It appeals to all political and social actors to resolve their differences through dialogue. We also urge the international community to support such a dialogue. Panama understands that, while there is no peace between Israel and Palestine, there will be no peace in the region.

Mr. Wolff (United States of America): Since our last meeting, there have been a number of significant developments.

As members know, Secretary Rice had a productive series of meetings with Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas during her January trip to the region. Both sides reiterated their support for the road map. My capital then hosted a meeting of Quartet principals on 2 February. Recognizing the critical need to end the Palestinian-Israel conflict, which would contribute to security and stability in the region, the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations issued a statement that reaffirmed the Quartet principles and support for efforts aimed at realizing the two-State vision.

Secretary Rice subsequently discussed the situation with her Quartet counterparts on 9 February. She and her Quartet counterparts will meet again in Berlin on 21 February to assess the situation. Prior to that meeting in Berlin, Secretary Rice will travel to Jerusalem, the Palestinian territories and Amman. She will hold bilateral meetings with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders, as well as a trilateral meeting with President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert on 19 February. In Amman, Secretary Rice will meet with King Abdullah of Jordan and other members of the Jordanian Government.

The United States strongly supports the bilateral dialogue between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas. We anticipate that the upcoming discussions, in particular the trilateral meeting, will focus on advancing our shared goal of a two-State solution to

the conflict, in accordance with the sequence of the road map. Moreover, we will continue to assist the parties as they work on day-to-day issues, such as security, movement and access. In that regard, Saudi King Abdullah's efforts to bring an end to the violence between Palestinians is commendable. We continue to assess the outcome of the meetings in Mecca and we will be looking closely at implementation to ensure that the three principles enunciated by the Quartet are met.

While those developments are encouraging, the situation in the region remains delicate. That can be seen in the strong reaction to the construction of the ramp at the Temple Mount, or Haram Al-Sharif. As always, we urge all parties to exercise great care when deciding whether and how to engage in any activity near sensitive religious sites. All parties should ensure that conduct and rhetoric regarding those activities are appropriate and respectful. This is a delicate issue that requires moderation and a clear understanding of the facts. In that regard, we welcome steps by the parties that can help reduce tensions and ensure transparency. We reiterate that there is no justification for the use of violence by protesters.

Any discussion of fostering greater peace in the region must include Lebanon. The United States remains committed to a sovereign, democratic and prosperous Lebanon and continues to call for the full implementation of all Security Council resolutions pertaining to Lebanon, including resolutions 1701 (2006), 1680 (2006) and 1559 (2004).

The 7 February incident along the Blue Line underscores the need for the parties to exercise restraint, to cooperate with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon in accordance with its mandate, and to avoid actions that could further exacerbate tensions, in particular the initiation of the use of force.

On the eve of the anniversary of Rafik Hariri's death, the United States calls on all parties to exercise restraint and to use peaceful and constitutional means to debate the political issues before them.

We strongly condemn today's terrorist attack in Beirut, which can only be seen as an attempt to silence and intimidate those like Mr. Hariri who struggle to realize the vision of a sovereign, independent and democratic Lebanon. Allow me to express my condolences to the victims and to their families.

It remains critically important for the future stability and political development of Lebanon that all those involved in the terrorist attacks in Lebanon since October 2004, including those responsible for the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri and, most recently, Minister Pierre Gemayel, are held accountable. We support the efforts of the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission, and look forward to the timely establishment of a tribunal of international character, which will help ensure that justice is done.

We remain concerned about reports of continued shipments of arms to Hizbollah and other armed groups, and all on all States to observe the arms embargo established by resolution 1701 (2006) and the related arms provisions of resolution 1559 (2004). The Security Council must be united in insisting that Syria and Iran abide by their obligations under Security Council resolutions to respect Lebanese sovereignty and end their support for armed militias.

Mr. Liu Zhenmin (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): The Chinese delegation would like to thank Mr. De Soto for his detailed briefing.

The question of the Middle East has been a difficult issue for the international community for the past 50 years or so. It is therefore extremely necessary and timely, at the beginning of a new year, for the Council to hold another open debate for a full exchange of views on how to promote and reinvigorate the peace process in the Middle East.

The situation in the Middle East has recently shown some positive signs. On 8 February, following arduous negotiations under the good offices of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the leaders of Hamas and Fatah — the two main factions in Palestine — signed an accord in Mecca in which they declared that they had reached agreement on the establishment of a Government of national unity, on the political platform for the new Government and on the reorganization of the PLO. China welcomes that development, and appreciates the active role played by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Arab countries. All factions in Palestine have, therefore, finally agreed to cease all acts of violence and provocation, halt inter-factional fighting and achieve peace among themselves. That is indeed a gratifying and encouraging development.

We sincerely hope that all Palestinian brothers, regardless of which faction they belong to, can join

hands to preserve the long-term national interests and cause, effectively implement the agreement that has been reached to consolidate unity by finding common ground despite existing differences and establish a unity Government as soon as possible, so as to resume peace talks between Palestine and Israel. For that is the only way to bring about a bright future for the just cause of the Palestinian people.

At the same time, however, we have taken note of some worrisome trends in the situation between Israel and Palestine. Recently, work by the Israeli Antiquities Authority at the site of the site of the Holy Al-Aqsa Mosque to build a new walkway to the Temple Mound compound has given rise to strong reaction in Arab countries. As we all know, what occurred at the site of the holy Al-Aqsa mosque six years ago triggered large-scale violence and conflict, which led to a serious setback in the peace process in the Middle East. We hope that all sides will learn the lessons of that event, exercise restraint, respect the religious holy sites of both sides and not take any hasty actions, so as to avoid repeating history.

The situation between Lebanon and Israel is part and parcel of the peace process in the Middle East. Six months following the end of the conflict between those two countries, gunfire once again erupted along the Lebanese border. We believe that to be a regrettable development. Both sides should carefully respect the hard-won resolution 1701 (2006) and exercise maximum restraint and calm, so as to effectively implement their commitments to cease all hostile acts.

Tomorrow will be the second anniversary of the death of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. We hope that the International Independent Investigation Commission can identify and bring to justice the perpetrators of that assassination as soon as possible.

We strongly condemn the bombings that occurred today in Beirut. We also hope that the Lebanese people can come together in order to find a peaceful resolution to their domestic differences, while maintaining their national unity, independence and territorial integrity and achieving peace and development in their country.

The situation in the Middle East has not only brought untold disaster to the region, it has also had an impact on peace and development throughout the entire world. China has always believed that the relevant resolutions of the United Nations, the principle of land for peace, the Quartet Road Map and the Arab Peace Initiative constitute the basis for the resolution of the Middle East issue. The establishment through political negotiations of an independent Palestinian State living side by side in peace with Israel remains the only way to resolve the question of Palestine. That is in keeping with the basic interests of both Palestine and Israel, as well as of all the countries of the Middle East region. We hope that the Quartet will soon produce a new initiative to promote the implementation of the Road Map, so as to achieve peace and stability in the region as soon as possible.

Mr. De La Sablière (France) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I too would first like to thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his briefing. I would also like to say that my delegation aligns itself with the statement to be made shortly by the Permanent Representative of Germany on behalf of the European Union.

I should like to refer first to the situation in Lebanon, a friendly country with which France has special historical ties. The successful international conference in support of Lebanon that took place in Paris on 21 January was an opportunity to make direct gestures of support — in the form of pledges totalling $7.5 billion — for Lebanon, its people and its legitimate Government. Unfortunately, tragedy has now once again struck Lebanon. The two bomb attacks on buses near Bikfaya, north of Beirut, which caused a number of victims, is a reminder of the cost the Lebanese people continue to pay as they assert their sovereignty. France condemned that heinous and cowardly attack in the strongest terms, which occurred on the eve of the commemoration of the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri, almost two years to the day since that event. Those responsible for that new attack, as well as for the attacks that have taken place in the course of more than two years, must be held accountable for their crimes.

Mr. President, my delegation would like to thank you for organizing consultations after this debate; we believe that the Security Council must respond to this horrendous crime with a statement. In the face of this new attempt to destabilize Lebanon, it is more essential than ever that the Lebanese should come together, so as to avoid falling into the traps that have been set for them, and that they should return to dialogue. We call on all parties to work together to preserve the stability

of the country and to ensure an effective follow-up on the Paris conference and the complete implementation of Security Council resolutions, particularly resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006).

With regard to southern Lebanon, France recalls the importance of full respect for the Blue Line in all circumstances and the need to make rapid progress toward reaching a lasting ceasefire and a long-term solution in line with resolution 1701 (2006).

Turning to the issue of Israel and Palestine, a number of recent events have been cause for renewed hope. France truly hopes that after months of political stagnation, violence and suffering, the peace process between Israel and Palestine can at last be brought back on track. We would first of all like to pay homage to the intra-Palestinian agreement reached in Mecca on 8 February under the auspices of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. This agreement on the formation of a government of national unity, which we had been earnestly calling for several months, provides an opportunity for Palestinians to overcome their divisions.

France considers that that agreement, which provides for full respect by the future government of international legality and the agreements that have been reached between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, represents a step in the right direction, towards full accession to the principles that have been guiding the peace process since Madrid and Oslo. The rapid creation of such a Government should now be encouraged by the international community in order to open the way to renewed cooperation and the reopening of talks in order to create a Palestinian State that is independent, viable, democratic and sovereign, existing in peace and security, side by side with Israel.

France also welcomes the recent resumption of dialogue between the parties with the support of the international community. The Israeli-Palestinian summit of 23 December, the Israeli-Egyptian summit of 4 January and the visits to the region made by Ms. Rice and Mr. Solana, have relaunched a political momentum that had been paralyzed for too long.

At its meeting in Washington on 2 February, the Quartet decided to support in an active and determined way the relaunching of the peace process. We hope that the upcoming summit meeting between President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert, under the auspices of the United States Secretary of State, planned for 19 February, and the meeting of the Quartet in Berlin on 21 February, will accelerate that momentum.

We continue to believe that an international conference that is properly prepared would be useful to support the peace process and give the parties the security and other guarantees that they need.

We know how numerous and difficult the obstacles are that remain to be overcome. We count upon the political will of the various players, Israel and Palestinian Authority above all, to meet those challenges. The priority, of course, is the implementation by the parties themselves, under the supervision of the Quartet, of the commitments that have been made, particularly the Sharm el-Sheikh agreements and the obligations under the road map, the Agreement on Movement and Access, and the arrangements of 23 December.

In order to re-establish confidence, it is necessary that the violence stop. The Palestinian Authority must tirelessly counteract terrorism. Israel must respect humanitarian international law. Corporal Gilad Shalit must be released without delay, as must be the Palestinian elected leaders who are held in Israel. Unilateral actions must be halted, particularly settlement activities and the construction of the wall in the West Bank, which threatened the viability of a future Palestinian State.

Finally, with regard to the very delicate situation in East Jerusalem, France recalls the fact that the status quo must not be changed, in order not to prejudge the outcome of final status negotiations.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I would like to begin by aligning myself with the statement to be made later by the Permanent Representative of Germany on behalf of the European Union. I would also like to join others in thanking the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for his comprehensive briefing.

The United Kingdom continues to be fully committed to advancing the Middle East peace process. My Foreign Secretary had the opportunity to discuss the way forward with Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas and Foreign Minister Livni, during her visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories last week. We welcome the ongoing efforts to end the violence and to promote intra-Palestinian reconciliation, and we would like to join others in particularly welcoming the recent efforts by Saudi

Arabia and by King Abdullah in person to help achieve this end.

The fact that an agreement was reached in Mecca to form a Palestinian government of national unity is clearly an important development. We await with interest the details of that agreement. The United Kingdom looks forward to engaging with a new Government based on the Quartet principles. We hope that the formation of a national unity government will mark the end of intra-Palestinian violence and allow us all to move forward.

The United Kingdom welcomes the Quartet's statements of 2 and 9 February and the commitment from both parties to advance the peace process. Like other Member States, we look forward to the forthcoming trilateral meeting between Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas and United States Secretary of State Rice.

However, and as a number of speakers have noted this morning, significant challenges remain. We condemn without reservation the suicide attack in Eilat on 29 January. There is no justification for attacks such as these, which only serve to escalate further an already tense situation in the region. Qassam rocket attacks continue to be launched into Israel, and the situation remains fragile at the Al-Aqsa mosque. The United Kingdom urges that any action in that holy site be taken with the agreement of all parties concerned and in a way that respects the status quo.

The United Kingdom will continue to work closely with our international partners. We must continue to provide international assistance to build capacity in Palestine and to help the Palestinian economy develop. Governance and economic reform go hand in hand with political progress. We remain committed to finding a solution that will result in a comprehensive and lasting peace with two States, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security.

I should also like to address Lebanon. The United Kingdom continues to be concerned by ongoing political instability in Lebanon. Today's bombing of two buses near Beirut is another deplorable act, and we condemn it, too, without reservation. I would like to stress again that there is no justification for such attacks.

The United Kingdom continues to support the democratically elected Government of Lebanon in its efforts to resolve the current political impasse, and we urge all parties to participate in those efforts through peaceful dialogue.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate France on the successful Paris III conference, which will significantly boost the Lebanese economy.

The United Nations has a central role to play in helping Lebanon achieve durable peace and stability. The United Kingdom continues to believe that Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) provides the best framework for solving Lebanon's problems. We welcome all constructive international mediation efforts to help resolve the crisis and we urge regional States to avoid destabilizing the situation in Lebanon.

As many speakers have noted this morning, the key now is for all Member States to assist the Government of Lebanon with the full implementation of resolution 1701 (2006). We therefore welcome the progress made so far, especially in helping the Lebanese authorities extend their control over the whole of their territory. But here, too, there is more to be done. Making progress on the disputed Sheba'a farms and securing the release of the captured Israeli prisoners, as well as ensuring the implementation of the arms embargo under resolution 1701 (2006), are all critical.

I should like at this point to say that, like others, we were concerned by the serious incident that occurred on 7 February along the Blue Line. It is important that both sides act with caution and restraint. We welcome the tripartite meeting that took place on 12 February.

The role of the United Nations in seeking justice for the murder of Rafik Hariri is crucial. The United Kingdom fully supports the work of the Organization's International Independent Investigation Commission. We stand ready to assist the Commission in its work in any way we can. It was important that the Security Council achieved agreement on a tribunal to follow that investigation. We hope that Lebanese politicians will find an agreed way forward and that the tribunal can proceed.

Mr. Verbeke (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): Belgium supports the statement to be made shortly by

the representative of Germany on behalf of the European Union. We thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto for this briefing, which has enabled us to better understand the issue on the Council's agenda.

We all find ourselves agreeing with the observation made here last month by Under-Secretary-General Gambari: we cannot afford another lost year such as the one that just passed by. The role of the international community — our role, our responsibility — is to create the conditions necessary for a resumption of negotiations between the parties. The parameters for reaching such an agreement are well known: the Road Map, the relevant Security Council resolutions, the Madrid terms of reference and the Beirut Declaration of the League of Arab States.

Belgium welcomes the recent meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas, and the initiative of a trilateral meeting undertaken by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. But this resumption of dialogue cannot remain at the mercy of further incidents. Our collective responsibility is to put in place a negotiation process capable of resisting the blows of fate. The responsibility of the parties is to prove their commitment through negotiation, by implementing previous agreements.

Belgium recalls the resolve of European Union to become actively involved. We support the central role of the Quartet as the guarantor of a clear political outlook and as a catalyst for various initiatives. We commend the Quartet for reaffirming its willingness to meet regularly. That will enable it to actively assist the parties in updating the modalities for implementing the Road Map and in monitoring developments on the ground. In that context, Belgium is pleased at the active role played by the Arab countries and welcomes the Mecca Accord as a positive step.

If 2007 is to make a difference, we must rely, first and foremost, on the actions of the parties. Belgium welcomes the efforts of President Abbas to form a Government of national unity. We will be ready to cooperate with a legitimate Palestinian Government equipped with a programme that reflects the Quartet principles. A lasting peace will not be built by rejecting past agreements. Those agreements are not ad hoc measures, but the very foundations for a lasting peace.

Belgium condemns the continued firing of rockets into Israel in violation of the Gaza ceasefire, as well as the terrorist attack against the population of Eilat. We welcome the restraint shown by the Israeli Government, and we call upon the Palestinian leadership to put an end to the violence. We hope for a swift extension of the ceasefire to the West Bank. We also call upon the Israeli Government to halt settlement activities and the construction of the wall within the West Bank.

I should like to conclude with a few words about Lebanon. After the events of summer 2006, Belgium decided to participate in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon as a reflection of its desire to contribute to the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006). We earnestly hope that, in his next report, the Secretary-General will be able to make proposals aimed at implementing the political component of resolution 1701 (2006), particularly with regard to the issue of the Sheba'a farms.

We welcome the strong message that the international community sent at the Paris Conference. We call upon all Lebanese to settle their differences through cooperation, rather than confrontation.

Finally, we forcefully condemn this morning's serious, tragic and odious incident and express our deep sympathy to the families of the victims and to the Government and the people of Lebanon — a people dear to Belgium.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as Permanent Representative of Slovakia.

Slovakia fully aligns itself with the statement that will be delivered shortly by the Permanent Representative of Germany on behalf of the European Union.

At the outset, I should like to join previous speakers in thanking Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his briefing as well as for his valuable observations and remarks. We agree with his observation that, despite the many challenges and problems facing the Middle East these days, there is a window of opportunity to reinvigorate the peace process.

The meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas at the end of last year created a positive momentum that needs to be seized and further developed through concrete and immediate action, including confidence-building measures on both sides. The views and positions expressed by the parties and

by regional leaders during the latest visit of United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to the region are another positive signal that there is a growing political will to overcome the existing stalemate and move towards meaningful negotiations.

We therefore welcome the upcoming trilateral high-level United States-Israeli-Palestinian meeting among Secretary of State Rice, Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas, to take place on 19 February. We consider it a crucial step towards the resumption of the peace process and believe that it will provide vital impetus to that end.

In that regard, we welcome the latest Quartet meeting, held on 2 February, and the Quartet telephone discussion of 9 February, and we support the statements issued. We look forward to the close and active engagement of the Quartet with a view to a comprehensive settlement of the Middle East conflict. We are convinced that the Quartet still represents the most appropriate mechanism for advancing the peace process and that the Road Map is the most effective plan for achieving a lasting peace settlement.

We support the idea of more regular and frequent Quartet meetings at the principal and envoy levels according to an agreed calendar, with the next meeting to be held at the principal level in Berlin on 21 February to further discuss the way ahead.

We also note Israel's recent decision to resume transfers — albeit partial transfers — of withheld Palestinian tax and customs revenues. We call once again on Israel to continue such transfers and encourage it to consider doing so through the extended temporary international mechanism, which, in coordination with the Office of the Palestinian President, provides essential relief to many Palestinians.

We note with satisfaction that an agreement was reached in Mecca last week between the Palestinian factions to form a national unity Government, and we commend the initiative of His Majesty King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in facilitating that deal. We consider it to be an important step forward. We hope this agreement will end the deadly internal strife among Palestinians. We expect that the new Palestinian Government will be committed to the Quartet principles and that its political platform will enable early engagement as well as the continuation of dialogue on a solution to the Middle East conflict.

Turning now to the daily developments on the ground, we express our deep concern over the recent deterioration in the security situation in the area and condemn the suicide bombing in Eilat on 29 January. We reiterate our call for an immediate end to violence by Palestinian factions as well as to attacks on Israel, notably the launching of rockets against Israeli population centres, and for the release of the abducted Israeli soldier. We support the efforts and leadership of President Abbas in this regard.

We also hope and expect that Israel and Palestinians will exercise their utmost restraint and do everything possible to sustain and further consolidate the mutually agreed ceasefire in Gaza. We feel that at this critical time it is of paramount importance not to jeopardize further possible progress and the promising prospects for peace in the region. For this reason we also call for a sensitive and thoughtful approach in dealing with historical and religious sites in Jerusalem, so that these do not turn into another unfortunate source of mutual distrust and even violence. It is important that both parties engage in a constructive dialogue and embark on mutual measures aimed at defusing accumulated tensions.

We expect the Israeli Government, for its part, to continue its commitment to peace based on the principles laid out in the Road Map and to refrain from steps and activities that might run counter to the principles of international law. In this context, we repeat our call for immediate release of Palestinian ministers and legislators in Israeli custody and for a halt to all settlement activities.

Now I shall turn briefly to Lebanon. Tomorrow is the second anniversary of a tragic event — the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. In this respect, we believe it is high time to put an end to politically motivated violence in Lebanon. We strongly condemn the most recent terrorist attacks on innocent civilians that took place this morning. We call for proper investigation of this case and for bringing the perpetrators of this crime, as well as perpetrators of other terrorist attacks in Lebanon, to justice.

We believe that the signing of the agreement between the United Nations and the Lebanese Government setting up a special tribunal to prosecute the suspected killers is a welcome development in this direction. We hope that the Lebanese Government will

take the necessary measures to complete the ratification process without delay.

Slovakia has been following with great concern the recent developments in Lebanon, including the clashes in the streets that led to civilian casualties. We deplore attempts to achieve political objectives through violence, and we would like to encourage the efforts to stabilize the situation on the ground.

We are convinced that only through the united efforts of all Lebanese people and through dialogue and peaceful negotiations will the solution for many outstanding issues be found. In this respect, we support the efforts of Prime Minister Siniora and the legitimately and democratically elected Government aimed at maintaining dialogue with all political actors in Lebanon in order to tackle a number of important challenges the country is facing. We also commend the mediation efforts of the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States Amr Moussa, as well as all other constructive international efforts aimed at facilitating a consensus within the country.

We welcome the results of the International Conference on Lebanon's Reconstruction held in Paris on 25 January. We hope the pledges of assistance to Lebanon will soon be realised in order to support its reconstruction, economic recovery and reforms, so as to restore the foundations for sustained development and life in dignity for all Lebanese people.

We have repeatedly expressed our support for Lebanon's sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity, which must be respected by everyone. We believe that resolution 1701 (2006) provides a good basis for the stabilization of the situation in Lebanon. However, it is crucial that this resolution, and all other relevant Security Council resolutions, be fully respected and implemented by all relevant actors in all their aspects. The constructive role and positive contribution of Lebanon's neighbours and other countries in the region are very important, if not crucial in this regard.

Finally, we commend UNIFIL for its role in Lebanon and for its unrelenting efforts to maintain peace and prevent a return to hostilities, including the speedy action to address the recent incident on the Lebanese-Israeli border.

I now resume my function as President of the Security Council. I shall now give the floor to the Permanent Observer of Palestine.

Mr. Mansour (Palestine): At the outset, I should like to extend, on behalf of my delegation, our congratulations to you, Sir, on the assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for the month of February, and to wish you every success in guiding the work of the Council to a fruitful conclusion. We should also like to express our appreciation to your predecessor, the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, for the able leadership demonstrated during the month of January. We thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto for his briefing and for his participation in today's meeting.

Based on the initiative put forth by His Majesty the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and under his auspices, a dialogue on Palestinian national conciliation was held last week. The dialogue culminated in a successful agreement between the leaders of the Palestinian people. We thank Saudi Arabia for this valuable effort and we also thank all the other Arab leaders who have contributed to this success. In this regard, the agreement endorsed the cessation of any and all internal strife among Palestinians and approved the speedy formation of a national unity Government. The importance of national unity was reaffirmed in order to achieve the legitimate national goals of the Palestinian people. As such, peaceful dialogue will now serve as the sole basis for solving political differences among Palestinians.

The leaders of the Palestinian people pledged their commitment to the agreement in letter and in spirit and pledged to devote their efforts to eliminating the Israeli occupation and regaining the national rights of the Palestinian people. Moreover, key issues, such as occupied East Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees, the prisoners and detainees, and the continuation of the illegal construction by Israel of its wall and settlements throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, will be given top priority.

Furthermore, in his capacity as Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian National Authority, President Mahmoud Abbas will commission Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh to form the next Palestinian Government in the next couple of days.

The President will call on the prime minister of the next Government to abide by the interests of the Palestinian people, to protect their rights, to preserve and develop their achievements and to work towards achieving their national goals as ratified by the resolutions of the Palestine National Council, the Basic Law, the National Conciliation Document and the resolutions of Arab summits. Accordingly, President Abbas will also call on the prime minister of the next Government to respect Arab and international agreements signed by the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

It is certainly our conviction that the future formation of a national unity Government based on the above-mentioned principles should provide for the lifting of the financial blockade imposed against the Palestinian people by some in the international community after democratic elections were held in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, in January last year.

The success of the Palestinian leaders in placing the larger issues facing the Palestinian people before political disagreements produces a constructive environment for the upcoming meeting, to be held on 19 February 2007, between President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, under the auspices of United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The meeting will have two different elements. The first part will be of a practical nature: to discuss issues such as the release of prisoners, the release of taxes belonging to the Palestinian Authority, the implementation of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access and the lifting of restrictions on the movement of Palestinian persons and goods in the West Bank, as well as extending the ceasefire to the West Bank. Nearly all of these issues were discussed at the last meeting between President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert; many of them have yet to be implemented.

The second element will be regarding the overall political process. President Abbas will reiterate the readiness of the Palestinian side for talks on the final-status issues to commence at once. This will be based on the termination of the Israeli occupation and the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian State, based on 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and reaching a just solution to the refugees issue in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 1948. If that meeting proves to be a success — and we hope it does — it will greatly influence the success of future meetings, including the upcoming Quartet meeting to be held this month in Berlin.

The international community has repeatedly reiterated its call for Israel to end its occupation, which started in 1967, and has voiced its support for the vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and within secure borders. Hence, what needs to happen for this to transpire is for a specific timeline to be established, with a mechanism of monitoring, in order to finally reach a just and comprehensive agreement. In this regard, an international conference could provide a way to accomplish these objectives.

The Palestinian side has spoken. We are ready. We have unified our people and the ranks of our leadership. President Abbas, as Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO, the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, has the mandate to negotiate peace based on international legitimacy, including United Nations resolutions, the Road Map and the Arab Peace Initiative. Now the question that presents itself is whether Israel is ready for real and genuine talks to commence, which will forever terminate its occupation of the territories occupied since 1967.

It is apparent that we are faced with a historic moment which must be seized by all parties interested in a genuine and long-lasting peace. However, recent developments have continued to dash hopes of peace among the Palestinian people. These include the condemnable and outrageous decision taken by the Israeli Government on Sunday, 11 February 2007, to continue with the politically motivated and extremely explosive construction and so-called excavation work under the Al-Burag wall in the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound. This illegal action by Israel, the occupying Power, is indeed endangering the sanctity, integrity and foundations of the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound. Moreover, this has sparked serious alarm and clearly presents an indication that the intentions of the Israeli Government are not to promote peace but rather to agitate the Muslims and Christians in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. Such measures also enrage the peoples of the Arab world and Muslims and Christians throughout the world.

In a scene reminiscent of the incidents that led to the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada on 28 September 2000, on Friday, 9 February 2007, Israeli occupying forces stormed the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem, using excessive force against Palestinian worshippers and wounding dozens of them. Has Israel not learned from previous dangerous actions it has taken, including the infamous visit of Ariel Sharon to the holy shrines of East Jerusalem, which ignited the second intifada — the Al-Aqsa intifada?

It should be recalled that the Old City of Jerusalem and its walls are protected by the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and are inscribed on the United Nations World Heritage List and the List of World Heritage in Danger. In a recent statement on this matter, UNESCO called on the Israeli Government to halt its illegal actions and stated that the distinctive character of the Old City of Jerusalem derives, in particular, from the close relationship between the historical and religious buildings and the peoples living with them and noted that interfering with the delicate balance among the symbols of the three monotheistic religions would entail running the risk of undermining respect for sacred beliefs.

It is also important to remind the Council that the afore-mentioned action by Israel has been committed in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, of 1949, and The Hague Regulations of 1907 and in blatant defiance of relevant Security Council resolutions. In numerous Security Council resolutions, the Council has affirmed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to all the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, and has repeatedly declared that all of the measures and arrangements taken by Israel, including legislative and administrative ones, aimed at changing the legal status, demographic composition and character of the city are null and void and without any legal validity whatsoever.

This is the immediate responsibility of the Council, in accordance with the United Nations Charter. If the Council were to succeed in fulfilling those obligations and halted and reversed Israeli actions in this regard, it would indeed have played an extremely crucial role, a role not only in addressing this perilous situation and in upholding international law, including international humanitarian law, but also in creating the necessary environment favourable for enabling the peace process to move forward and in order for a final agreement to be reached between the two sides. We sincerely hope that this will be achieved.

Moreover, the rest of the international community also has an obligation to the parties and must ensure that no unilateral measures are taken that endanger the fragile prospect of peace we now are presented with. Illegal actions such as those taken by Israel in occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, in addition to Israel's continued settlement activity and the construction of its wall, could prove to be a catalyst for this historic moment to slip away. This cannot be an option. The Palestinian people have invested more than a decade on initiatives that have promised them a world of change. The time has now come to offer real and genuine proposals that promise a just and lasting peace: one in which a Palestinian State, with East Jerusalem as its capital, will be established. That will guarantee freedom, peace and security for all.

The President: The next speaker is the representative of Israel, to whom I give the floor.

Mr. Gillerman (Israel): Mr. President, allow me at the outset to commend you on your leadership of the Council and to wish you success for the duration of your tenure. I would also like to thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto for his briefing and for being here with us today.

Let me start with a reminder. The international community has clearly determined that any Palestinian Government must fully adopt the following three conditions: first, recognition of the State of Israel; secondly, a halt to, and the disavowal of, terrorist activities; and, thirdly, acceptance and implementation of the agreements that have been previously signed with Israel, including acceptance of the Road Map.

Those are firm principles, not paltry recommendations. They cannot be bypassed, masked or circumvented. They are the prerequisites for peace, and they are not negotiable. That position was rightly reiterated by the Quartet in its meeting on 2 February and in a press statement this past Friday. As such, the published agreement on a so-called unity government does not address the reality on the ground. We have been fooled by a piece of paper before, with tragic consequences. I hope the world has learned its lesson.

Palestinian acts of terror, including the firing of Qassam rockets and the smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip, continue. In the past two days alone, five Qassam rockets have been fired by Palestinians in the

Gaza Strip at the western Negev city of Sderot. That adds up to more than 37 terrorist rocket attacks in the past three weeks alone, as just pointed out by Mr. De Soto, and over 140 since the ceasefire was agreed to at the end of November — a ceasefire which Israel is respecting and the Palestinians are consistently violating. All the while, the abducted soldier Gilad Shalit, held by Hamas, has yet to be released.

Two weeks ago, on Monday, 30 January, a 21-year-old Palestinian from the Gaza Strip blew himself up inside a bakery in the southern city of Eilat, killing three Israelis. Islamic Jihad, the terrorists who claimed responsibility for sending that young man to carry out a suicide attack and murder Israelis in cold blood, praised the terrorist attack, saying:

> "This operation, which was carried out by the heroes of the resistance ... in the lands of 1948, is coming as an initiative of a different kind to wake up consciences and to re-aim the rifles at the enemy".

This so-called initiative of a different kind is, sadly, not so different at all. It is the continuation of the policy of the Palestinian leadership to wage a war of terror against the State of Israel rather than put its people on the road to statehood.

It is important for us to understand that the only reason Hamas has sought a so-called unity Government is precisely because the international pressure placed on it was working.

By displaying a united front, the international community, the Quartet and, indeed, the Council made it clear to Hamas that it would not be recognized or engaged until it meets the world's demands.

Hamas must now be made to understand that it cannot bypass these conditions by creating a façade of unity. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and Hamas and this new entity will be judged by their actions, not just their words.

So far, however, Hamas has not even said the right words. On the contrary, the words its leaders have spoken carry a very different message. Ismail Radwan, a Hamas spokesman, said:

> "The agreement reached in Mecca does not mean recognition of the Israeli entity ... it is a non-recognition of the legitimacy of the Zionist movement".

There cannot be a process so long as one side refuses to acknowledge the existence of the other.

The Mecca agreement does not condemn violence and terrorism either. How can there be a peace process when one side is under the threat of constant terror and violence? Previous agreements reached between Israel and the Palestinians must be fulfilled before the unity Government can be addressed. Previous agreements are not part of a menu from which Hamas can pick and choose only those elements it wants to fulfil.

The reality of the situation in Jerusalem has, unfortunately, been blown so far out of proportion that we must revisit the basic facts in order to understand what is actually going on. I refer the Council to my letter dated 7 February 2007, in which the details of the salvage work were addressed. Because the reality has been distorted and grossly politicized, it is also worthwhile to reiterate those main points.

Since 1967, the Mughrabi gate has been the access bridge to the Temple Mount for all non-Muslims — Jews, Christians, tourists and others. Only Muslims can enter through the other gates. Israel has consistently respected the sanctity of the area and shown the utmost sensitivity when dealing with the various religious authorities. During the winter of 2004, part of the ramp leading up to the Mughrabi Gate collapsed due to erosion caused by a snowstorm and an earthquake. Following the collapse, a temporary wooden bridge was constructed, as the ramp to the Mughrabi gate was considered a dangerous structure. By law, the debris must be removed or the collapsed part rebuilt. As such, the salvage work under way in the Jerusalem Archeological Park is for the sole purpose of erecting support pillars for a permanent access ramp, to replace a pre-existing ramp. This bridge is for the benefit and safety of visitors to the area. Just imagine the outcry around the world, from Muslims and others, if that bridge were to be allowed to collapse.

The work is taking place in sovereign Israeli territory and outside the very sensitive area of the Temple Mount. Israel is acting fully within its rights and jurisdiction. The digging is being conducted with full transparency, in accordance with the various antiquities laws and under the auspices of leading experts and professionals in the field, in coordination with the various religious authorities. Israel has no intention of affecting the Temple Mount during this

repair work or of causing any damage to it. Let me assure you, Mr. President, and the members of the Council that this delicate matter will continue to be handled in a most courteous and sensitive way.

In contrast to the situation in Jerusalem, the situation in Lebanon is a very real and substantial matter of pressing concern that requires urgent action.

Last week, on Monday, 5 February, Israeli soldiers discovered explosive devices in the north in a situation that reminded many of the incident of 12 July 2006 which provoked last summer's war with Hizbollah. Later in the week, Israeli soldiers were shot at by the Lebanese army while looking for similar explosive devices in the same area, north of the technical fence and south of the Blue Line — all in sovereign Israeli territory.

That incident, however, was just a small preview of the real violations, which should concern and alarm us all. The real violations unfolded on Friday, when the Lebanese army, acting as it should, confiscated a truckload of arms on its way to Hizbollah. As I have told the Council previously, Hizbollah is rearming through the trafficking of arms and munitions across the Syrian-Lebanese border. This must be stopped and the embargo enforced, as called for by resolution 1701 (2006). It is our belief that the Council should have addressed that incident, which shed light on a phenomenon that is widespread throughout Lebanon, in particular the violation of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006).

May I also remind this Council that our boys Udi Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, kidnapped seven months ago, have still not been released. We have not even received a sign of life. In voting for resolution 1701 (2006), the Council pledged to see their unconditional release. I urge the Council today to follow through on that commitment.

Hizbollah's rearming and what we saw in Lebanon this morning — innocent people killed and many others injured by bombings on public buses — are the real situation in the Middle East and the real issues which should be of great concern to all of us. This bombing, coming on the eve of the second anniversary of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, no less — an event this Council is still investigating — is a sobering reminder of the reality in our region.

A disturbing trend is emerging whereby some within the international community wish to advocate concessions, coddle the extremists and prematurely declare success. Those pronouncements do not serve the interests of peace. They only embolden the extremists, and send them a message that the international community does not mean what it says.

The international community must send an unequivocal message to the forces of extremism — to Hamas and Hizbollah, and to their puppet masters Iran and Syria, whose tentacles exert a destabilizing influence — that it will no longer permit their villainous meddling in our region.

Hope for our region, however, has not been lost. In order to lay the groundwork for peace, Israel is willing to work with the moderates, strengthen their ability to fight terror, assist them in their efforts to meet economic and humanitarian needs and help with the development of their political agenda. In order for those endeavours to be successful, however, our neighbours need to make the right choices, and moderation must prevail over extremism. If they do, they will be surprised to learn how far Israel is willing to go, together with them, to secure the reality of a peaceful Middle East.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Lebanon.

Ms. Ziade (Lebanon): Allow me at the outset to congratulate you, Sir, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for this month. I would like to express my appreciation to your predecessor, the Permanent Representative of Russia, for his able leadership of the Council last month. We also express our appreciation to Mr. De Soto for his briefing.

I would like to associate my delegation with the statements to be delivered later by the representatives of the Arab Group, of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Lebanon was today subjected to a heinous terrorist attack that took the lives of innocent civilians — an attack that is emblematic of the instability in our region. This morning, on the eve of the second anniversary of the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri, explosives were detonated inside two public buses near the town of Bikfaya, killing three

people and injuring 22 others — some critically, according to our latest information.

That act was aimed at intimidating the people of Lebanon, causing panic and destabilizing the country. On behalf of the Lebanese Government, the Prime Minister has requested technical assistance from the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission in investigating that act of terror. The revelation of the truth about those who are behind these acts is paramount for the long-term stability of Lebanon and the consolidation of its democracy.

We would like to take this opportunity to reiterate how important it is for the special tribunal for Lebanon to achieve justice and provide the Lebanese with the opportunity to live in sovereignty, security, and tranquillity.

We meet once again in this body to discuss the Middle East — a region rife with tensions, resulting in large part from Israeli practices against the Lebanese and the Palestinians. Israel recently began construction and excavation work beneath the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound. Israel has also been heavy-handed in dealing with civilians attending Friday prayers and protesters peacefully making their opinions heard. Israel's actions not only seriously threaten the foundation of the mosque, risking its collapse, but they also threaten the foundations of any possible peace or goodwill in the region. Israel is touching on a very sensitive issue for Muslims throughout the world, as it is threatening one of Islam's holiest sites.

Israel continues to create a new fait accompli on the ground in Jerusalem, in violation of relevant Security Council resolutions. In Lebanon, Israel continues its breaches of Lebanese sovereignty by not fully complying with its obligations under resolution 1701 (2006), as demonstrated by the events along the Blue Line on the night of 7 February. Israel claimed that it was conducting demining activities by night in an area where the Blue Line is not clearly demarcated. The Lebanese Armed Forces conveyed a message through the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon that Israel should postpone its activities until the morning to avoid confusion as to the location of the Blue Line. They further proposed that the matter be resolved through regular liaison channels before any military action was taken on the ground. Nevertheless, the Israeli armed forces persisted, rejecting the Lebanese request. The Israeli bulldozer crossed the technical fence and continued to advance. In spite of warning shots fired by the Lebanese Armed Forces, the Israeli forces continued their advance, violating the Blue Line and crossing into the Lebanese side to a depth of 30 metres over a front of 50 metres.

It is clear that the Israeli armed forces provoked the incidents at the Blue Line by not resorting to the coordination and liaison channels and by insisting on operating in a sensitive area where the Blue Line is not clearly marked. The Lebanese Government strongly protests against the ongoing Israeli violations of the Blue Line in breach of resolution 1701 (2006).

We also look forward to the prompt settlement of the Sheba'a farms issues, as stipulated in resolution 1701 (2006). To that end, we refer to our Government's seven-point plan regarding the Sheba'a farms, and call on all parties to cooperate to protect Lebanon's sovereign rights in that area. Finally, we encourage the important endeavours of the Secretary-General and look forward to tangible developments in that regard.

Israel's July war on Lebanon continues today with over 1.2 million cluster bombs that regularly continue to kill and maim innocent Lebanese civilians. Israel dropped those bomblets in blatant defiance of international humanitarian law. A report published by the United Nations Environment Programme describes the disastrous environmental and humanitarian consequences of the Israeli war on the population in the South of Lebanon and its impact in their livelihoods.

I should like here to take this opportunity to thank all the countries that are helping Lebanon in the daunting process of demining and making south Lebanon a safe place for its population. We ask the Security Council to press Israel to provide the appropriate authorities with all the maps of where it dropped those bomblets, as well as all the maps of mines that it planted during its occupation of south Lebanon.

On 25 January, the Paris III Conference demonstrated the will of the international community to help Lebanon, and we are grateful for that support. The Lebanese Government presented a reform plan that was hailed by donors and financial institutions alike. A total of $7.6 billion was pledged. The political message was clear: Lebanon's sovereignty and stability are vital and the Lebanese deserve and require international assistance to achieve those goals. We hope that the

reforms which that support accommodates will be implemented in a stable Lebanon, where a permanent ceasefire is achieved in accordance with resolution 1701 (2006).

The Lebanese Government has undertaken all necessary measures within its capacity to ensure security along its borders. The Lebanese army is doing its utmost to combat arms smuggling across the border. The Lebanese army is exercising its authority and duty to defend the sovereignty of the country. What we need is to reinforce the Lebanese army's capabilities to discharge its national duties.

We thank the United Nations for its support of Lebanon and its efforts to bring about peace and stability throughout the region.

The President: I call on the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): Allow me at the outset, Sir, to thank you for convening this meeting today. I also thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his useful briefing, although he failed to make any reference to the occupied Syrian Golan in his description of current events in the context of the situation in the Middle East. The Israeli occupation authorities continue to detain scores of Syrian nationals in their detention camps and prisons and to build settlements in the Syrian Golan, in violation of Security Council resolution 497 (1981).

I would be remiss if I failed on this occasion to extend our thanks and gratitude to the delegation of the Russian Federation for its successful and distinguished conduct of the Council's deliberations last month. We also thank the Secretary-General for stressing the comprehensive nature of any solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the situation in the Middle East.

My delegation associates itself with the statements to be made by the representatives of Kuwait on behalf of the Arab Group, of Azerbaijan on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and of Cuba on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

One surprising irony in the annals of the United Nations — without which Israel, created by the Organization, would not have seen the light — is the fact that, over the years, while Israel has pursued its racist, expansionist, settler occupation of Arab territories and continued to suppress and aggress the Palestinians, it has become a staunch adversary of peace and obstinately flouts the will of the international community, as represented by the resolutions of this Organization. Never before has a United Nations Member so challenged the Organization or shown the ingratitude that Israel has shown since it was created.

So true is this that the expressions "double standards" and "double benchmarks" were coined and insinuated themselves into diplomatic jargon with specific reference to the imbalance in the treatment of Israel that frustrates the will of the international community. Regrettably, the high and mighty continue to cover up Israel's attempts to obstruct the will of the international community, to protect Israel politically and legally from the consequences of its behaviour, and to prevent it from being held accountable for its ongoing occupation policies.

A reading of General Assembly resolution 273 (III) of 11 May 1949, whereby the General Assembly voted to accept Israel as a Member of the United Nations, reveals that the General Assembly noted then that "Israel is a peace-loving State and is able and willing to carry out the obligations contained in the Charter" and "the declaration by the State of Israel that it 'unreservedly accepts the obligations of the United Nations Charter and undertakes to honour them from the day when it becomes a Member of the United Nations'" (*General Assembly resolution 273 (III), second and fourth preambular paragraphs*).

Given the fact that Israel has violated every condition of membership in the United Nations, reneged on its commitment to respect the Charter and shown its true colours as a peace-hating rather than a peace-loving country, it is legitimate from the legal perspective to question the obligation which the aforementioned resolution places on the international community and the extent of Israel's violation of the principles and purposes of the Charter.

The Security Council is meeting today, for perhaps the thousandth time, to debate the agenda item entitled "The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question". Israel, the occupying Power, is wantonly violating all international laws and ethical norms. The new chapter in the ongoing saga of terror by Israel — as defined by legal norms, the occupying Power of Arab territories — began on 6 February 2007 with its excavation activity that seeks to undermine the

foundations of the Al-Aqsa mosque, which holds symbolic and sacred significance to Muslims throughout the world and to the Islamic faith itself. That new act of Israeli provocation is a continuation of the Israeli approach to which we have become accustomed. Israel's current aggression against Al-Aqsa mosque is not the first of its kind, for it also attempted to burn down the mosque in 1969 and excavated a tunnel near the mosque in 1996. In another act of aggression, on 28 September 2000, Ariel Sharon, leader of the right-wing opposition at the time, visited the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, which led to the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada and to the hampering of the peace process.

A reading of historical documents since 1967 reveals Israel's deliberate steps to alter the demographic map of Jerusalem. The first of those steps occurred in 1968, just one year after the occupation of Jerusalem, when Israel laid siege to a 3.5 square kilometre area of that city and made plans to build Jewish settlements there. Within a few years, Israel established what it called the first cordon around Jerusalem. When no one budged in response to Israel's violation of international law, Israel took a second step in 1970 and confiscated 12 square kilometres of the northern part of Jerusalem and established what it called the second cordon. In its third step, in 1980, Israel set up what it referred to as the third cordon, following the confiscation of 4.4 square kilometres in the northern part of occupied Jerusalem. Those acts of confiscation, which violated United Nations resolutions and the relevant international instruments that affirm the illegality of building on occupied territory, provided the opportunity for Israel to build its settlements.

Statistics indicate that the number of Palestinian residential units in 1967, prior to Israel's occupation of the city of Jerusalem, totalled 12,000 — a figure that eventually rose to 38,000 units. Statistics also indicate that 15,000 residential units, which are home to 280,000 Palestinians, are classified as illegal units by the occupation authorities. Moreover, in 1967 there were no Israeli settlement units in Jerusalem. However, today, that number is more than 59,000 settler units, all of which are illegal under international law and which house 182,000 Israeli settlers from the Jewish diaspora who have come to live on the territory of others.

I shall summarize Israel's establishment of settlements in Jerusalem, a lamentable step that the international community has called illegal, as follows.

First, Israeli occupation forces confiscated 2,000 dunums of land in the Palestinian village of Al-Walaja to build 5,000 units for settlers. Then they built 4,600 settler units near the village of Telat Al-Tayara. Then, as part of the Jabal Abu Ghneim project, they built 17,500 residential units. And, as part of a project announced in January 2007, another 1,000 settler units will be built in the Jabal Abu Ghneim area of Jerusalem.

I felt obliged to cite those historical events in order to remind the international community, which the Security Council represents, that Israel has been aware beforehand of the likely results of its provocative acts. I am not at all surprised that Israel is determined to push events to the point of escalation, given that there are now signs of easing of tensions regarding the Palestinian issue, following the agreement arrived at by the Palestinian parties at Mecca — which was successfully brokered by Damascus. It is also not surprising, because the entire international community has now welcomed the declaration of a Government of national unity in Palestine that will work to realize the aspirations of the Palestinian people to independence, freedom and the establishment of an independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital. Syria has been tireless in seeking to bring the various Palestinian parties to the negotiating table and to achieve a rapprochement of view points in order to ensure that the enemies of just and lasting peace will not prevail and to overcome all pretexts by Israel that there is no Palestinian partner for peace.

In turn, the Israeli Government committed yet another act of aggression against the Al-Aqsa mosque, in an effort to foil Arab and international efforts to relaunch the peace process, as well as to undermine all that has been achieved thus far and to impede all diplomatic efforts. I should point out that, legally speaking, Israel's act of aggression against the Al-Aqsa mosque is a flagrant violation of Israel's responsibility as an occupying Power in terms of altering the character of occupied Palestinian territory, which includes East Jerusalem, under the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and Security Council resolution 478 (1980).

From the political perspective, Israel's recent actions pose a serious threat to international efforts to revive the peace process. Among other things, those actions are aimed at aborting the possibility of holding negotiations on final status issues, especially those pertaining to Jerusalem and the return of refugees in accordance with General Assembly resolution 49/149. This is taking place at a time when major capitals, eminent persons and others with political influence — both from the Arab world as well as from the rest of the world — are striving to relaunch the peace process and bring the parties closer to a resolution.

My country has always stressed that its strategic choice is a just and comprehensive peace. For my country, a strategic peace is one that requires a genuine commitment by both parties. It is contrary to a peace based on a fait accompli that gives Israel everything, for nothing in return.

Strategic peace is a responsibility and a decision. It is not manoeuvring, irresponsibility, or merely buying time. Strategic peace is built on decisions of international legitimacy, such as resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), the principle of land for peace and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Israel must understand that peace requires the full withdrawal from the occupied Golan to the line of 4 June 1967 and also the withdrawal from other Lebanese and occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem.

On this occasion, I would like to stress that a just and equitable resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict is not elusive, if the Israelis show the real political will to make peace. Israel's will is an issue that was discussed by most of the Member States that took the floor today.

Above all else, peace is a responsibility. It requires more courage than war does. As such, the Arab-Israeli conflict has, from its earliest days, seen more than 30 Arab and international peace initiatives, all of which faced Israeli rejection, supported by the use of the veto 44 times by a super-Power. Unless Israeli Governments and their protectors assume their responsibilities, show courage and understand that promoting the logic of might in international relations and the choice of military might will not last, our region will lack peace and stability and the suffering of its peoples will continue unabated. International peace and security will always be threatened; the principle of land for peace will be empty words, and international relations will always be marred by acute tension.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Kuwait.

Mr. Al-Murad (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): Mr. President, at the outset and on behalf of the Member States of the Arab Group, it is my pleasure to congratulate you on your presidency of the Security Council this month, and to wish you every success in conducting the Council's work. We also wish to thank your predecessor, the representative of the Russian Federation, for his distinguished conduct of the work of the Council last month.

I would also like to express appreciation for the comprehensive report presented by Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and the Secretary-General's Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority.

I would like to express sorrow on behalf of the Arab Group for the tragic incident that took place today in Lebanon and which claimed the lives of civilians and caused casualties among passengers of two buses in the area of Bikfaya. It was a criminal act of terror that must be condemned.

Today, the Council is discussing the situation in the Middle East, including the question of Palestine. This question has been the most important and outstanding matter on the Council's agenda for over five decades. As the Council is well aware, the question of Palestine is the quintessence and core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Events during the past few years have demonstrated the validity of the conviction established by the international community that the resolution of this question represents the essence itself of a comprehensive and just solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this context, we commend the agreement that was reached in Mecca between the Palestinian factions. We appreciate the efforts of the fraternal Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and of the Custodian of the Two Holy Sanctuaries, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, and all other Arab efforts that culminated in reaching this important agreement. We hope that a Palestinian national unity Government will realize the aspirations and hopes of the Palestinian people, who have been suffering for decades from harsh economic and living conditions as a result of the policies and practices of the Israeli occupation.

Since the Council's last discussion on the situation in the Middle East last month, the occupied territories have witnessed serious acts of violence and dangerous escalation on the part of the Israeli occupation authorities, most notably, the acts of demolition and excavation in the perimeters of the noble sanctuary, the Al-Aqsa mosque. These acts represent a flagrant violation of the sanctity of the mosque and a threat to its foundations, features and religious symbols.

While we express our strongest condemnation and denunciation of these hostile Israeli actions against the third holiest shrine of Islam and the first direction in which Muslims look, we call upon the Security Council as the body responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security to assume its responsibilities and intervene immediately to make Israel respect decisions of international legitimacy and desist from such practices that target the religious and cultural identity of Al-Quds Al-Sharif and represent a provocation and disdain for Muslim sentiment.

These practices also represent a flagrant violation of the 16 relevant Security Council resolutions, foremost among which is Security Council resolution 465 (1980). The Council has emphasized in numerous resolutions that all measures as well as judicial and administrative arrangements taken by Israel, the occupying Power, aiming at altering the legal status of the occupied city of Al-Quds and its demographic structure, are all null and void. Furthermore, these acts are in clear violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which applies to all the territories that Israel has occupied since 1967, including Al-Quds Al-Sharif. They also violate The Hague Convention of 1954, which provides for protecting places of worship — which represent the spiritual heritage of peoples — from threats or hostile acts.

Israel's continued demolition and excavation within the perimeter of the Al-Aqsa mosque, its military incursions and continued aggression on the territory of the Palestinian Authority within the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and its continued imposition of an economic siege, as well as its illegal construction of the separation wall, construction of new settlements and expansion of existing ones, are all unlawful and illegal practices. They clearly and openly violate international law, the relevant United Nations resolutions and the Road Map endorsed by the Security Council in its resolution 1515 (2003). Moreover, those practices not only have dire effects and consequences on the security and stability of the region and the world, but also undermine the international efforts led by the Quartet to revive the peace process.

A just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict — at the core of which is the Palestinian question — will never be found if Israel continues its unilateral actions to impose a fait accompli and influence the outcome of final-status negotiations. A lasting settlement must end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese lands on the basis of the resolutions of international legitimacy, including Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), the Madrid terms of reference and the principle of land for peace, as well as the requirements of the Road Map and the Arab Peace Initiative. Such a result would enable the Palestinian people to recover all their legitimate political rights and to establish their own independent State on their national soil, with Al-Quds as its capital, and would lead to a full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Syrian Golan to the borders of 4 June 1967.

Finally, if Israel should continue its illegal and unlawful demolition and excavation within the perimeter of the Al-Aqsa mosque, the Arab Group reserves the right to raise this issue once again to compel Israel to comply with the relevant United Nations resolutions, particularly Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 465 (1980).

The President: I now call on the representative of Germany.

Mr. Matussek (Germany): First of all, I would like to thank Special Coordinator De Soto for his impressive presentation today.

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. The candidate countries Turkey, Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the countries of the Stabilization and Association Process and potential candidates Albania and Serbia, and the European Free Trade Association country Iceland, as well as Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, align themselves with this declaration.

The international community is faced with many a challenge in the Middle East. It is, however, the ongoing standstill in the Middle East peace process that could ultimately prove to be the most serious threat to stability and security in the region, if not on a

global scale. It is therefore up to all of us to move the peace process forward and to intensify our efforts to do. First and foremost, it is up to the parties to the conflict to become further engaged; but the international community is no less called upon to contribute. It is up to the members of the Arab world, and especially to the Middle East Quartet, to become — and to continue to be — increasingly involved.

The European Union has repeatedly emphasized its determination to play an active role within the framework of increased Quartet activity. Let me therefore stress, as stated in Washington on 2 February, the Quartet's intention to provide active follow-up to meetings between Israeli and Palestinian leaders and to remain closely engaged at this time of increasing dialogue. The Quartet has also reaffirmed its commitment to meet according to an agreed calendar and to monitor developments and actions taken by the parties. The European Union thus looks forward to the forthcoming meetings of the Quartet, including those with the parties and other regional partners.

At the core of the issue, of course, is the need for Israeli and Palestinian leaders to launch a process with the goal of ending the occupation that began in 1967 and creating an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel. The European Union thus expresses its full support for the forthcoming meeting among Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas and Secretary of State Rice, scheduled to take place in the next couple of days.

We call for continued international assistance to the Palestinian people and welcome the recent extension of the temporary international mechanism, which, in coordination with the Office of the President, is providing essential relief to a large part of the Palestinian population. It presently reaches out to some 150,000 households. Once again, we call on Israel to carry out the immediate transfer of all withheld Palestinian tax and custom revenues, and we encourage Israel to do so through the temporary international mechanism.

Furthermore, strengthening Palestinian institutions of governance and developing the Palestinian economy are of critical importance. In that context, I would like to recall the tremendous importance of full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access and urge that Rafah and all other crossing points be reopened and remain open. Let me also, at this stage, reaffirm the European Union's continued commitment to the European Union Border Assistance Mission in Rafah.

The European Union welcomes the fact that an agreement was reached in Mecca last Thursday on the formation of a Palestinian national unity government. Here, I would like to pay tribute to President Abbas for his sustained efforts to that end. The European Union stands ready to work with a legitimate Palestinian government that adopts a platform reflecting the Quartet principles.

Allow me to add that we sincerely appreciate the work of the Saudi Arabian Government, and in particular the valuable efforts of King Abdullah, to bring about this meeting. I would also like to commend the initiative of the Governments of Jordan and Egypt in reconciling the Palestinian factions.

In the light of recent developments on the ground, the European Union reiterates its call for an immediate and unconditional end to all acts of violence and terror. It also calls on the parties to consolidate the ceasefire in Gaza and to extend it to the West Bank.

The European Union condemns in the strongest terms the suicide attack perpetrated on 29 January in Eilat, where three people were killed and many others wounded. On behalf of the European Union, I offer our sincere condolences to the victims' families and our sympathy to the injured. Such attacks are aimed at innocent civilians with the goal of derailing the peace process.

In this regard, the European Union urges the Palestinian leadership to do everything in its power to put an end to terror and to bring to justice those who support terror. It is vital to continue the genuine progress made in recent weeks in the search for peace, notably through the courageous efforts of both the Government of Israel and the Palestinian President to build confidence. The European Union also urges the parties to fully implement steps discussed at the 23 December meeting, to refrain from taking any measures that could predetermine issues to be resolved by negotiations and to seek to fulfil their obligations under the Sharm el-Sheikh understanding of 2005.

The European Union is deeply concerned about the recent authorization of settlement activities by the

Israeli Government and the ongoing construction of the barrier on Palestinian lands. These developments are contrary to international law and to the Road Map. We call on Israel to desist from any action that threatens the viability of an agreed two-State solution. Settlement activities in and around Jerusalem as well as in the Jordan Valley are of particular concern. The European Union will not recognize any changes to the pre-1967 borders other than those agreed by both parties.

With all this in mind, the European Union looks forward to the next Quartet meeting at principals level, which is scheduled to take place in Berlin in just over a week from now, to further discuss the way forward.

On Lebanon, the European Union welcomes the success of the international conference in support of Lebanon, held in Paris on 25 January 2007. By pledging more than $7.6 billion in aid, the international community has sent a strong message of support to the people of Lebanon and to its legitimate and democratically elected Government.

The European Union and its member States contributed more than 40 per cent of the total aid pledged at the Paris conference. These contributions are intended to provide Lebanon with the resources it needs to meet the challenges of reconstruction and macroeconomic stabilization. In this respect, the European Union reiterates its support for the reform programme adopted by the Lebanese Government on 4 January 2007, notably its social component, as well as for the commitment in principle to the signing of a post-conflict agreement with the International Monetary Fund. The adoption of the EU-Lebanon European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plan will enable further deepening of our existing cooperation within the framework of the Association Agreement and of the Barcelona process.

Having said that, the European Union condemns in the strongest terms the targeted attacks on two buses in Lebanon which today claimed several lives and left many injured. Once again, we offer our condolences to the victims' families and our good wishes to the injured. The European Union also expresses great concern about the renewed violent clashes of the past weeks in Lebanon, which claimed several lives and caused numerous injuries. The European Union urges all parties to refrain from all forms of violence and to do everything possible to prevent an escalation of the situation. A solution to the current political deadlock should be sought only through dialogue and with full respect for the democratic institutions of the country. The European Union urges all Lebanese actors to actively engage in such a dialogue and reiterates its appreciation for all constructive international mediation efforts, in particular those by the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, to facilitate an intra-Lebanese agreement.

The European Union reaffirms its commitment to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Lebanon. It renews its call for the full and speedy implementation of resolutions 1701 (2006), 1664 (2006) and all other relevant resolutions of the Security Council and reminds all parties in the region of their obligations thereunder. The European Union also reiterates its call on Syria and other countries in the region to refrain from interfering in the domestic affairs of Lebanon. They must, instead, actively engage in the stabilization of Lebanon.

The President: A number of speakers remain on my list for this meeting. I intend, with the concurrence of the members of the Council, to suspend the meeting until 3 p.m. sharp.

The meeting was suspended at 1.45 p.m.